

# PLUCK AND LUCK

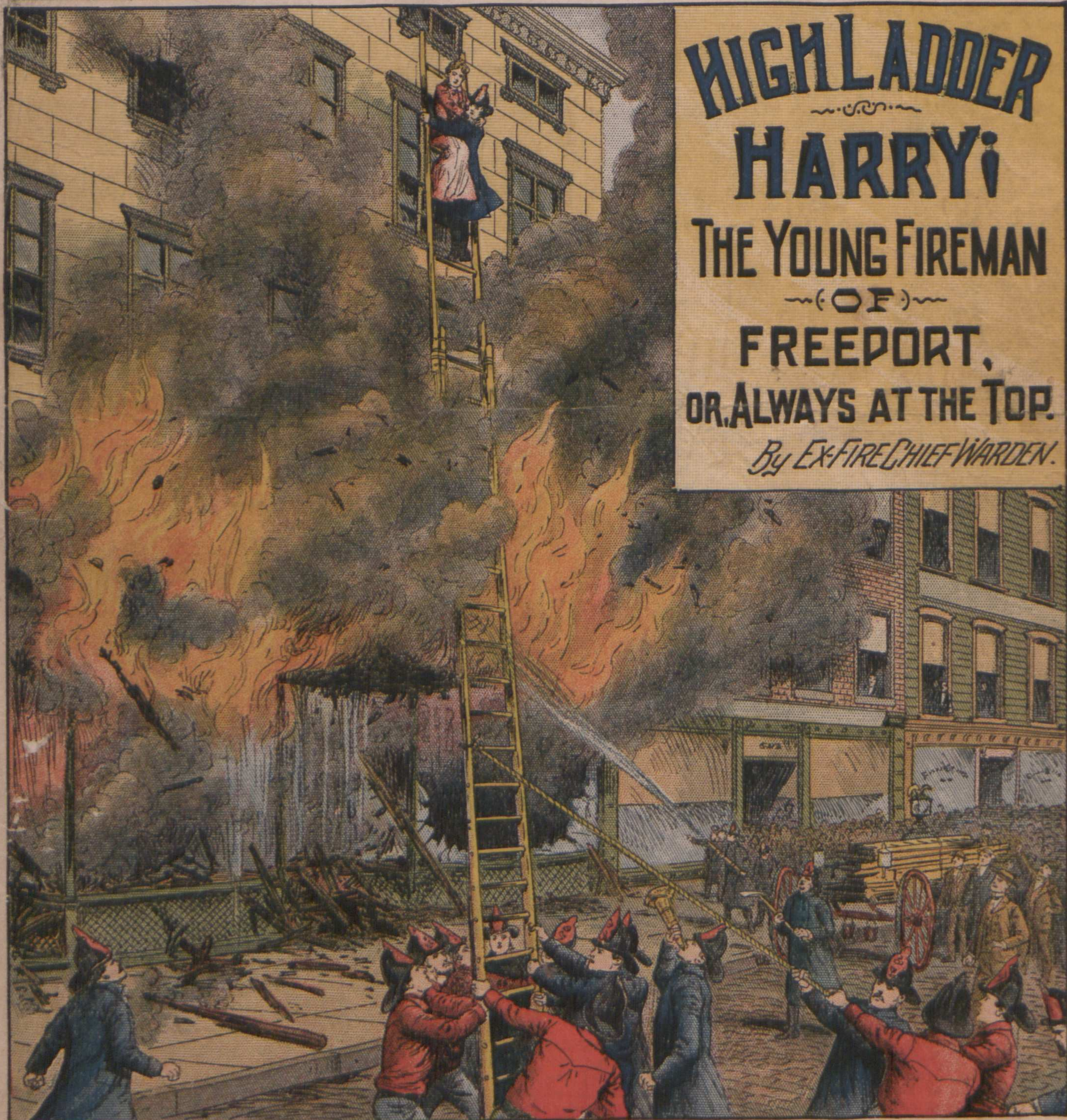
COMPLETE  
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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No. 279.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 7, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.



**HIGH LADDER**  
**HARRY!**  
**THE YOUNG FIREMAN**  
—(OF)—  
**FREEPORT,**  
**OR, ALWAYS AT THE TOP.**  
*By EX-FIRE CHIEF WARDEN.*

Out of the smoke swung the ladder and hovered in midair. Harry's legs were knit about the rounds, and in his arm was a light, feminine figure. It was a moment of awful suspense.



From  
E. MESSIER  
OCT-1954  
BUILT OVER AND SAVED  
BY KEN. DARGETT



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## HIGH LADDER HARRY,

The Young Fireman of Freeport;

OR,

## ALWAYS AT THE TOP.

By **Ex-Fire Chief Warden.**

### THE YOUNG FIREMAN OF NO. 2.

"Harry Wilton, you are a liar!"

It was a forcible declaration, and rang loudly through the hall of the city council in the small city of Freeport. The speaker was a tall, powerful young man, with flushed face and angry manner, and he faced a rather more slender, yet finely built youth, a boy in years.

The latter, whom he had addressed as Harry Wilton, was a handsome, frank appearing youth, a general favorite with the entire population of Freeport, to whom he was well and favorably known.

"Take care, Jack Benson! I never allow any man to call me a liar. Take back the statement, or I will force you to do it!"

"Force me!" was the sneering exclamation. "Why, you little whippersnapper, how dare you talk to me in that way. I will repeat my statement and defy you. If you say that you were elected fairly as Foreman of Hook and Ladder No. 2, I say once more that you are a liar!"

This was too much for Harry Wilton. He was ever given to peace-making proclivities, but the words of Jack Benson, so pointing and insulting, stung him. He felt that he was bound to retaliate, in spite of the fact that the council chamber was filled with the representative men of Freeport.

Quick as a flash he let out his powerful right arm, and Jack Benson went down like a log.

A sensation was instantly created. Every one of the councilmen sprung from their seat and cries arose.

"For shame! This is a disgrace to the fire companies! Arrest Jack Benson!"

Maddened with the force of the blow, the villain was upon his feet instantly, and rushed again upon Harry, only to be promptly knocked down again. By this time strong hands seized Benson, and he was led from the chamber, cursing frightfully and vowing vengeance.

Harry Wilton stood calm and a little downcast until the noise had subsided. Then he exclaimed:

"Gentlemen and friends, I regret this occurrence more than you can know. I am a little ashamed of myself that I should have struck that scoundrel in this place. I have only to say in defense that he has worked against me uncompromisingly in our company, and insulted me so many times that I was no longer to forbear. I am willing to stand suspension or any punishment which you may see fit."

By this time the members of the council had regained their seats, and the president rapped for order. This done, one of the prominent members arose and moved:

"That Harry Wilton, the newly elected foreman of No. 2, be fully exonerated from any blame in his course of procedure and treatment of Jack Benson, who was known as a ruffian; also, that Benson's name be stricken from the roll of the company."

The motion was put, seconded and carried unanimously, amid the enthusiasm of the spectators present. Harry Wilton blushing bowed his thanks, and old Jim Keene, the veteran volunteer fireman of Freeport, came forward and slapped him heartily upon the shoulder.

"Good for you, my boy!" he cried. "I am mighty glad you gave it to the dirty dog. He has got his discharge and I am glad of it. It serves him right."

This sentiment was echoed upon all sides, and scores of people came forward to shake hands with the new foreman of No. 2.

Hook and Ladder No. 2 was the star fire company and the pride of Freeport. There were large warehouses and hotels in the town, which were constantly menaced by fire, particularly incendiarism, for a lawless class of people resided in the little Western city, and a good deal depended upon the efficiency of the fire department.

It must be borne in mind that our story is located back in the times when the old hand-trucks and hook and ladder companies were mainly volunteer organizations with but little pay from the municipality. Those were the red letter fireman



days for heroic deeds and daring rescues. Many a person living now can remember the old heroes with red shirts and visor hats who coped with the dread element unaided by any of the expeditious appliances or the fine salary of today.

Bravest of all was High Ladder Harry, as he was known in Freeport. None there were credited with the marvelous number of rescues or the daring deeds of the youthful knight of the ladder.

His cognomen of High Ladder Harry, as the reader can guess, was won partly through his intrepid daring in ascending the highest ladder, when all others had shrunk from very fear of death, to rescue some helpless infant or terror-stricken woman.

Fear was an unknown quantity in the young fireman's composition. Where the danger and the fire was thickest, there you would be sure to find him.

Small wonder that High Ladder Harry was popular. Every small place like Freeport has its hero, and Harry Wilton well merited the name.

When not on duty Harry worked in one of the warehouses. A singular fact was that his parents were among the wealthy and fashionable people of Freeport. Mr. and Mrs. John Bertrand he called father and mother, though his own father had gone West years before and lost his life in the gold mines.

As was natural, Harry did not agree with his stepfather, and although he lived at the palatial mansion, which had been built by his own father, he never went into his stepfather's presence.

Preferring to earn his own living, he commingled with the working people of Freeport, though in doing this he by no means lost his identity as a gentleman.

He had joined the volunteer fire company, and, being agile and light, was always the one selected to go to the top of the ladder. There in the thickest of the fire you would ever find him—always at the top. How he kept this position through life, the incidents of this story will tell.

The election of the company's officers had been held, and High Ladder Harry had been chosen foreman.

His opponent was Jack Benson, who, while not a bad fireman, was an envious, vindictive fellow, capable of any mean act.

Not one of the hook and ladder company but was now glad that he was out of it.

The members and friends of Hook and Ladder No. 2 were present in force and much elated over the election of their young foreman.

Three cheers were proposed for him, and after they were given, cries were heard calling for a speech.

There was no way out of the difficulty, and Harry was obliged to mount a table and address the company.

"My dear friends and members of No. 2," he said, in his trumpet-like voice, "you have done me the great honor of electing me foreman of No. 2. For this I thank you. That I will always endeavor to faithfully discharge my duties I can only pledge myself. We will leave the rest to time. Depend upon it, my heart is in the duties now incumbent upon me, and whether it be for life or death, you will find High Ladder Harry always at the top as of yore, anxious to serve, willing to risk his life, determined to do his duty, and eager to prove to you that he is not insensible to the confidence which you place in him, that he is not blind to the interests of the property owners of Freeport, and that he will do his best. More than this I cannot; more than this you will not ask of me. Again, dear friends, I call upon you to accept my heartfelt thanks."

The cheers which greeted this characteristic speech were deafening. The hall rang with the outburst, and legions of the young foreman's friends were pressing forward to congratulate him when a startling thing occurred.

As the war horse, at sound of the bugle, rears and becomes eager for the fray, so strong is the instinct of battle, so Harry Wilton felt the hot blood surge to his temples at a sound which smote upon the air of the chamber.

"Clang, clang, clang!"

Out upon the night air, arousing every sleeper in Freeport, electrifying those that were awake, went that thrilling call.

"Clang, clang, clang!"

"Fire, fire!" was the mighty cry.

Then a tremendous rush was made for the outer air.

How he did it he never knew, but High Ladder Harry was the first to reach the outer air.

Over the tops of the buildings the Western sky held a dull, mellow glow. Instinctively the young fireman guessed the truth.

"The Columbia Hotel," he muttered.

Then he sped away to the house of Hook and Ladder No. 2. He was the first to reach and break open the door. Chief Jim Keene was the next to arrive. In less time than it takes to tell it, Harry had run out the long line of rope, picked up the trumpets, and all was in readiness when, a few seconds later, the men all arrived and the run was made for the fire.

Such a run as that was!

Down the street like mad tore the excited fire company, and every man straining his utmost, so that they might reach the scene before any other company.

Now the fire is in sight.

A vast mass of people are surging in that direction. The flames are bursting out through the windows of the mammoth Columbia Hotel.

This hotel was always filled, and Harry Wilton knew that human life depended upon the most expeditious work.

Hook and Ladder No. 2 was the first to reach the scene. With the utmost haste and admirable management, Harry had the long ladders run out and mounted against the burning building.

By this time the hose wagons and engines had arrived. Connections were made and one of the firemen started up a ladder with a line of hose.

Soon a stream was playing on the fire, and business began in earnest.

But the fire even in the limited time allowed it had gotten good headway, and the flames were bursting out of the middle story of the building like a volcano.

Of course this shut off from escape all those on the upper floors. Death must be their portion, unless the hook and ladder company could save them.

There was work for No. 2 of the most perilous sort, but they did not shirk it.

Up the ladders went the brave firemen, and people half suffocated were brought out of the rooms so thickly filled with smoke, and carried or assisted down the ladder in safety.

Thus the brave men of No. 2 went on with their work, while water was kept on the flames.

But it was evident almost from the first that the top stories of the hotel must go. Water could not save them.

So hard did the brave firemen work that it was believed that all the people had been rescued from the building. But at the last moment a fearful scream was heard, and, glancing upward, they saw a blood-curdling sight.

Upon the verge of the burning roof crouched a young girl as beautiful as a dream, while with one arm hanging over the edge by her side lay the prostrate body of a man. All this could be seen in the glare of the flames.

An awful agonized shudder went up from the crowd.

It did not seem that she could ever be rescued from that position. Death seemed their certain portion.

The highest ladder would not reach that position. Even were it possible to rig a ladder, one would have to pass



through a literal volcano of fire, which would consume one before the roof was reached.

Hope seemed lost. The young girl and the insensible man seemed doomed to an awful death.

There were those in the crowd who knew her.

"It is the street singer Leda Lee!" was the great cry. "That is her imbecile father with her. Too bad! They are lost!"

This was the general sentiment. Everybody stood watching the doomed people and expecting every moment to see the flames reach them, when there was a stir in the crowd.

A trumpet voice rang out:

"Splice that ladder!"

The order was quickly obeyed. A great thrill ran through the crowd.

"High Ladder is going to try and save them!" was the exclamation.

The most intense interest was at once excited. People in their excitement crowded each other, and pressed against the rope barrier.

It was true that High Ladder Harry was about to execute one of the most daring acts ever witnessed, and which was to add fresh fame to his splendid career.

## CHAPTER II.

"I WILL DEFEND MY MOTHER!"

It did not seem in the power of human being to save the doomed pair on the roof. Yet Harry Wilton meditated doing it.

"This is the time he will fail," many people said. "No ladder can reach those people. Even if it did they could not descend."

This seemed true.

But Harry had, with an eagle eye and ingenuous mind, taken in the situation and made his plans with consummate judgment.

He noted the fact that no living being could ascend a ladder directly to the roof.

But he also noted that the roof was as yet clear of flames.

The street was a narrow one, and upon the opposite side from the burning hotel was a building of equal height. The young fireman noted this and shaped his plans accordingly.

The longest ladders on the truck were quickly spliced.

Then they were run up, and rested not on the wall of the burning hotel, but against the edge of the roof of the building opposite. The foot of the ladder was braced directly in the middle of the street.

"Now I am going to the top of the ladder," directed Harry. "When I swing my arms brace the ladder and swing it over against the burning roof. I may succeed and I may not."

Chief Keene heard the command and understood the plan so daringly formed by the young hero.

He recognized the mighty risk, but also the logic of the plan, and entered into it with all his soul.

"God be with ye, Harry," he said as the young fireman went up to the dizzy height like a cat for agility.

The crowd stood and gaped, not yet exactly aware of the young fireman's purpose. It became plain a moment later.

Now he was at the tip-top of the ladder. He paused a moment with his legs knit about the topmost round. It was an awful distance to the ground. A fall would mean certain death.

The young fireman saw and understood this. He glanced down to the crowd below, and then across to those on the burning roof.

He saw the young girl watching him with eager gaze.

It thrilled him.

Hesitation was no longer indulged in. He saw the mighty wall of flames spouting out from the stories below, saw that they must soon reach the roof, and then gave the signal:

"Let her swing!"

Ten stout men were at the foot of the ladder. Outward it went from the building against which it rested, hovered a moment in mid-air with the young fireman on top, then straight through the column of flame and smoke it swept.

There was a momentary vision of the young fireman in the midst of the smoke. Then the signal came again.

Out of the smoke swung the ladder, and hovered in mid-air. Harry's legs were knit about the topmost round, and in his arms was a light feminine figure. It was a moment of awful suspense. Over went the ladder, and struck the opposite building. A great shudder went up from the crowd.

For an instant it seemed as if High Ladder Harry must lose his balance, and it was a severe strain upon his muscles, but he hung to his hold grimly, and was safe.

The next moment he came down the ladder like a monkey, bearing Leda Lee in his strong young arms.

The crowd was frantic.

They would have demonstrated their enthusiasm more forcibly—have broken the rope barrier and carried the hero upon their shoulders, but the young girl cried in an agonized voice:

"Oh, save my father!"

It was enough for Harry. Up the ladder he went again.

Now he was at the top. Again it was swung over to the opposite building, and the young fireman had his arms about the insensible old man.

But it was no easy matter to handle so heavy an object. He was not long in want of an expedient.

At his waist hung a rope. With this he drew his man across the rounds of the ladder and tied him securely to it. Then he gave the signal, and was swung again out of the dense smoke to the building opposite.

It was an easy matter to descend the ladder, lowering his charge before him. The last person was taken from the burning hotel by High Ladder Harry. At least twenty lives had been saved by Hook and Ladder No. 2.

The brave young fireman would submit to no ovation. His duties were not ended, and he worked with the hosemen until the last spark was conquered and the fire was out.

Then the crowd slowly dispersed.

But the daring rescue by High Ladder Harry was upon all tongues. Everybody regarded the young fireman as a hero, though one person in particular gnashed his teeth in envious rage, and this was Jack Benson.

"He will feel pretty fine now," he muttered, darkly. "But I will get the upper hand yet. There is a day of reckoning coming."

After the fire was out Harry went home. It was an early hour in the morning, about four o'clock, and he entered the house quietly and went to bed.

But he had not yet dropped into the embrace of Morpheus when he saw the outlines of a form over him, felt the wet splash of a tear upon his face, and the touch of lips upon his brow.

"Mother!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, Harry," was the reply. "I have waited all night for your coming. I am so glad you are here."

In an instant Harry had sat up in bed and turned up the light. His mother sat by his bed, with her face buried in her hands.

Mrs. Bertrand was a woman whose features evidenced former beauty, and though her hair was plentifully streaked with white, she did not look within ten years of her rightful age.



"My mother," exclaimed Harry, solicitously. "What is the matter?"

Mrs. Bertrand looked up, and there was agony upon her face such as Harry had never seen before.

"Oh, I must tell you all," she declared. "Your father has not come home since early morning. When he went away, it was in a towering rage, and he made frightful threats."

"My stepfather, you mean," said Harry, with set lips. "Not my father—he is dead. But why has he done this, mother?"

"He is very angry with me. If you remember when we were married, he represented that he had a fortune of his own."

"Yes."

"I found out that was false. However, I furnished him money from my income, but that did not satisfy him. All the property, with the exception of my third by law, was held in trust for you. Now that Bertrand has spent my share, he wants me to force you to give up yours. I would not do it, and he got angry and vowed vengeance. Oh, I am afraid of him. Oh, why was I so foolish as to marry again? My heart will never heal."

Harry Wilton's blood boiled. He detested Bertrand as a miserable reprobate and a villain. His mother had been induced to marry him upon false representations, and this in itself was enough to make Harry hate him.

"The contemptible cur!" he gritted between set teeth. "So that is his game, eh? Mother, you must have a divorce from that brute. He will do you harm yet. If he should, God help him!"

"Oh, Harry, my darling boy," moaned the wretched woman. "You cannot know my heart tonight."

"Grieve no more," said the young fireman sympathetically. "Rest assured that I will stand between you and him, my mother. Tomorrow we will have an understanding."

But Harry could sleep no more, and daylight found him wide awake.

He arose and dressed himself at an early hour, and went downstairs to find his mother heartbroken in the library.

Harry drew her to a chair and, kneeling by her side, looked up into her face with love in his fine brown eyes, and asked:

"Mother, tell me all about father's death. I have never heard the story in full. Let me know it all."

Mrs. Bertrand caressed her son's head fondly and replied:

"Certainly, my boy. You shall have the whole story, and as I recall it now, I feel conscience-stricken to think I should ever have allowed your father to leave my side. He might have been with us today."

She brushed tears from her eyes and went on.

"We were happily married, James Wilton and I. We married for love of the purest, deepest sort. James inherited his father's wealth, and we settled down in this beautiful home.

"But he had a friend, John Bertrand, who was in poor circumstances. James always felt kindly toward Bertrand, and tried to help him. So deep an interest did he take in him that he was foolishly induced to invest in a gold claim in the West, loaning Bertrand the money for that purpose.

"As the claim did not turn out well, James went West with Bertrand and that is the last I saw of him.

"The story came back that James died of a fever and was buried in the wilderness.

"Bertrand came home and was very kind to me. For ten years I mourned the loss of your father, and then, through the misrepresentations of John Bertrand, I was induced to marry him. You know my unpleasantness and how he has treated me since."

"I know it well," said Harry, setting his lips tightly, "and I mean to have a settlement with him."

"Oh, you do, eh?"

The harsh, snarling voice came from an inner room, and the

speaker, who had heard all, now stood upon the threshold. It was John Bertrand.

He was a man of medium height, rather fleshy, and with a heavy cast of features, which at first view seemed to indicate a good-humored disposition. Closer acquaintance disproved this, however, for John Bertrand was by nature and practice a brute.

He hated Harry quite naturally, and now glared at him murderously.

Harry turned and faced the villain. He did not flinch as he said:

"I am very glad you are here, John Bertrand. This is just what I have desired. We meet on even ground."

"Do you think so?" sneered the scoundrel, bending a glance of hatred upon the young fireman. "I differ with you."

"What do you mean?"

"The advantage is on my side."

"Explain yourself."

"Can't you see it? I have caught you at a mean, whelp-like trick."

"A trick!" repeated Harry.

"Yes, you are trying to create a disturbance between me and my wife. If I did right I would kick you out of the house."

Harry trembled like an aspen.

"Your wife," he said in a voice shaking with suppressed passion. "But my mother. The tie between us is too sacred for such as you to break. Listen, John Bertrand, the law makes her your wife, but you are not worthy of her. I know your perfidious, base conduct, and as she is my mother, I will defend her against your brutality, if it takes my life."

The villain took a step forward as though he would strike the young fireman in his intense wrath, but he checked himself.

"This is enough," he said tersely. "You and I cannot live under the same roof, Harry Wilton. That is settled."

"Very well, sir," said Harry coolly. "The sooner you leave the better."

"What?" exclaimed the villain with an oath. "I leave my own house——"

"My house."

"What?"

"You know that this house is a part of my inheritance which you cannot cheat me out of, much as you would like to do it."

Bertrand was furious, but he saw that he had the worst of the argument. He glared at Harry in mute hatred, and then turning sullenly, left the room.

Harry turned and caught his half-fainting mother in his arms.

"Oh, God help me!" moaned the unhappy woman. "I cannot live longer with that man. I shall die. He will kill me yet!"

"Let him lift a hand to harm you," said Harry, with flashing eyes, "it will not be well for him. There will be a change in this house before long."

Calling a servant to attend his mother, Harry embraced her fondly and then left the house.

It was his purpose to go at once and consult a good lawyer, but as he turned a corner into a by-street in the little city, he was arrested by a thrilling, blood-tingling sight.

A burly ruffian had in his grasp the struggling form of a young girl, with a face as beautiful as a dream.

With a thrill Harry recognized her as the street singer, Leda Lee, whom he had rescued from the fire.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A DARK PLOT.

Harry Wilton was nothing if not chivalrous, and this sight set his whole being on fire.



Despite the fact that it was broad daylight, as the hour was early, the vicinity was quite deserted, so the villain had felt safe in his ruffianly attack. But he had reckoned without a host.

Harry sprung forward.

"Help! Save me!" cried the young girl, struggling frantically.

"Yer needn't make so much fuss about a kiss!" cried the ruffian, hoarsely. "I reckon ye've been kissed before."

"Unhand that girl!"

It was a sharp, ringing voice in such a commanding key that the brute could not disregard it, and suffered the young girl to slip from his grasp. He turned with a sudden curse.

They were face to face.

"Jack Benson!" exclaimed Harry with a sharp cry.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said the brute with a murderous glare in his eyes. "Once more you cross my path."

"I will cross it once too many times yet for your own good, Jack Benson," said the young fireman, decisively. "That is poor business for a man. It makes you a dirty dog. Get out before I kick you."

The villain was defiant and ugly, but he did not dare face the young fireman. He had not forgotten the sledge hammer characteristics of those fists which he had once experienced.

"And I've this much to say to you, Mr. Harry Wilton," he said at a safe distance; "you've meddled with my affairs once too often. I'll lay you out for it."

With this threat, which fell heedlessly upon Harry, the brute slunk away.

The young girl had shrunk into a doorway, but she now came trembling forward.

There was a smile upon her face which Harry thought angel-like.

"Oh, sir, I want to thank you for all your kindness to me. I will never forget you, and my father—he is thankful, too. You saved our lives."

"It is nothing," said Harry, with a blush which he could not help. "But tell me, what did this villain want of you? How dared he offer you insult?"

"I cannot tell, unless it may be that he thought me defenseless."

"The black-hearted scoundrel! Let him dare try it again. Then that old man with you is your father?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is his name?"

"Samuel Lee."

"And yours is Leda?"

"Yes, sir."

"A very pretty name," said Harry. "Where did you come from, Leda, and how do you make your living?"

"I will tell you," said the young girl with a tinge of sadness in her voice. "Samuel Lee is not my real father—I was an orphan child. My father and mother died and I was left alone in the world. Mr. Lee took an interest in me and was so kind to me. At length he adopted me as his child, and we have traveled everywhere. We had plenty of money always until a year ago; he got very sick, and since then I have earned money singing in the streets. It is a hard life, but there are many kind people to help us. Father," there were tears in her lovely eyes, "I fear, will not live long."

"Do not think that," said Harry with deep sympathy.

But the young girl shook her head.

"The doctors say so," she said. "He was never quite well. Long years ago, before I knew him, he had an accident of some sort which deprived him of the power of memory. That is, the first part of his life he can remember nothing of. It is all a blank."

"That is very strange," exclaimed Harry. "Indeed, I am

sorry. Yet do not lose hope. I have heard of such cases being cured."

"Oh, if he only could be cured," she cried, clapping her hands. "It would be so nice. He would be so happy. Perhaps he has dear friends somewhere in the world whom he cannot remember and who do not know where he is."

"I hope he may recover," said Harry in a kindly voice. "Well, Leda, I hope you may have good fortune, and if Jack Benson speaks to you again let me know, and I will have him taken care of. He is a brute."

"I thank you," said the young girl modestly, and then she passed from sight around a corner. Harry turned with a queer feeling in his heart.

"Strange why that girl so interests me," he muttered. "I pity her greatly. If Benson dares say another word to her I'll interview him seriously."

With this resolution Harry started on down the street.

But at a corner he came to a halt and instantly drew out of sight. A man and a woman were walking leisurely in front of him down another street.

Both were familiar to him.

One was his own stepfather, John Bertrand. Harry's face burned with shame as he recognized the woman as a notorious female sharper—an own sister to Jack Benson.

Bella Benson was known even in criminal circles, and Harry's whole being was fired when he saw Bertrand with her.

"Great heavens!" he gasped; "what on earth does it mean? What can he want with her?"

At first he was disposed not to believe that it was Bertrand; but there was the evidence of his own eyes, which could not be gainsaid in broad daylight.

Harry disliked the idea of playing eavesdropper, yet he was sorely tempted. Here was something in which he was vitally interested. It concerned his mother's honor. He would give much to know what that conversation was.

The two plotters, for such they certainly were, had now halted in front of a bill poster's fence.

Back of this was a vacant lot between the houses.

Harry was consumed with such a desire to know what Bertrand's business with the woman was that he threw his scruples to the wind and determined to overhear it if possible.

Fortunately the locality was a quiet, unfrequented one.

The young fireman passed through an alley, and finally managed to come out in the rear of the fence.

Here safely ensconced behind it he could hear every word spoken.

The conversation was a revelation.

"Here it has been six months," the woman was saying, "and you haven't brought me any money. I am getting tired of waiting forever. What if I should say the word? Up you'd go."

"Well, I have done the best I could," whined Bertrand.

"Ah!" thought Harry, "she has him in her power."

"I should say so," went on the sharp woman. "You have fooled me in every way. Here you have not made a move to throw this woman over whom you call your wife. We were to have been married by this time."

"But I haven't been able to get hold of the money."

"Is it going to take forever?"

"I am afraid so."

"What?"

"I don't think we will ever get a cent of it. The boy is too sharp."

"That is a pretty how-d'ye-do. Why didn't you tell me of that in the first place?"

"Because I thought I could get the money," whined the villain.

"I think you are a liar and have been deceiving me. If I find it out you will be sorry you ever did it."



"I swear that I was sincere. But things have not worked as I thought they would."

The woman laughed discordantly.

"Oh, well," she said, in a softer voice, "it is all in a lifetime. Everything can't go right. But there is nothing now to hinder you throwing that woman over."

"I shall have a divorce at once."

Harry drew a breath of relief.

"That will be welcome news to mother," he muttered. "We shall be well rid of you, Mr. John Bertrand."

"Speaking of money," said the woman unctuously, "I have a scheme to make a fortune."

"What is it?" asked Bertrand eagerly.

"I don't mind telling you, for I want your help. I will give an outline. There is a certain safe, in a certain bank, with one hundred thousand dollars in it. I know a way to open the safe. The trouble is going to be to get to it. If a fire should occur in some other part of the town, by accident, of course, everybody would be there. Then we could get into the safe. See?"

Harry Wilton experienced a thrill at this revelation of proposed bank robbery and incendiarism. He had just prepared himself for the full particulars, when suddenly the air was broken by a terrific sound.

Clang! clang! clang!

Fire! The alarm acted upon the young fireman like an electric shock. It was second nature to answer the call, yet he longed to overhear the remainder of the plot.

Only one moment he hesitated, though. Then he threw off his coat.

"Duty calls!" he cried, and was off like an arrow. Forgotten was all else for the time being.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### INTO A DEATH TRAP.

Had Harry Wilton remained to overhear the remainder of the conversation between John Bertrand and Bella Benson, it would have materially changed his after career. But fate, in the shape of the alarm of fire, had prevented this.

As it was he was almost the first to reach the house of Hook and Ladder No. 2, and the company itself was the first at the scene of the conflagration. They were greeted with cheers by the waiting crowd, but ignoring these proceeded to go to work. In a few moments ladders were erected and a stream was upon the flames, which were issuing from the upper windows of a tenement block.

The fire had started very suddenly and its origin was, as usual, a mystery. Whether accidental or incendiary it was certain that the flames made a terrific headway.

High Ladder Harry was the first on the ladder with a line of hose.

He went even to the roof and for a time was literally enveloped in flames and smoke. How he escaped death in his daring manipulations was a wonder. The crowd stood by and gaped.

It soon became very evident, however, that the checking of the fire was due almost wholly to the stream of water which he managed at his giddy height—on top of the highest ladder.

What might have been a serious conflagration was thus timely arrested and very soon under control. This was not the only manner in which Harry distinguished himself.

In a corner room in the very top of the building was a family of Swedes.

The husband was at his daily work, little dreaming of the danger menacing his loved ones, his wife and six small chil-

dren of various ages not over twelve years. These were in the corner room, right where the flames threatened the most fiercely. It was almost a foregone conclusion that their fate was sealed.

The stairs had been burned away, and the window was too high from the street for a leap.

The poor Swede woman, agonized and fearful, not so much for her own safety as that of her children, clung to the window ledge and screamed wildly, while great volumes of smoke rushed out over her head, nigh smothering her. Just visible above the window ledge endeavoring to breathe the fresh air, were seen six little flaxen heads. It was a sight to move the sternest heart.

"They cannot be saved," was the dread ultimatum.

But High Ladder Harry was determined that they should not perish. Up went the long ladder, and he mounted upward. The flames played about the middle rounds, and charred them. At an interval, when the flames were banished by the wind, Harry passed the dangerous point, and went on up to the window ledge.

A great cry went up from the crowd as they saw him at the window for an instant, then a terrible thing happened.

A section of the wall fell out just below, the flames in a torrent shot out and enveloped the ladder. Being of wood, it could not stand that blast, which would have consumed iron itself, and Harry felt the ladder giving way beneath him.

It was a moment to try the strongest nerves. To be precipitated to the street meant sure death, and to remain longer upon the ladder was to surely fall. On the other hand, it seemed certain death to accept the only alternative left, namely, to cling to the window ledge.

But Harry drew himself up into the window. The smoke was thick about him, but he heard the wailing cries of the little ones, which went to his heart. He experienced no pangs of regret. Better to lose his life thus nobly than to shrink from duty.

In all his career Harry had never faced such exquisite danger as now confronted him.

He could feel the walls trembling, and knew that they must soon fall. The floor beneath his feet even was burning.

But the fearful, blinding smoke was the worst foe of all. He felt giddy and faint.

But in times of the greatest peril, like the true hero, Harry never lost command of himself. He knew that all depended upon the promptest of action. Yet he was for an instant puzzled for a course of procedure.

It would be hardly possible to raise another ladder, the fire still continuing to rage so hotly below. To make his way to another part of the building seemed impossible. It was, to all appearances, a certainty that the brave young fireman had drawn himself up into a death trap.

"Oh, God help us!" the poor mother cried. "Sir, I fear you have sacrificed your life also."

The little children clung to Harry's knees, calling upon him for help. Their cries so thrilled him that all fears vanished, and he became possessed of the courage of a lion.

"Don't fear, little ones," he cried with a lump in his throat. "You shall be saved if it costs me my life to do it."

A thousand plans flashed through the young fireman's brain only to be dispelled. Suddenly an idea occurred to him.

Fire was below him and upon all sides. Suddenly a section of the flooring gave way. A terrible volume of flame shot up into the top story.

The tenement was a sham structure and the partitions were thin and unsubstantial.

Harry threw his weight against one of the partitions and forced it through. It proved their salvation.

A strong draught was caused, and the smoke for a moment



lifted. As it did so, Harry drew in a breath of fresh air and felt his strength renewed.

Before coming up the ladder Harry had provided himself with a long coil of rope, which he had fastened at his waist. In the end of this he made a slip noose, like a lasso, and then leaned far out of the window.

Just beyond the corner of the building was a tall telegraph pole, which stood on the edge of the sidewalk. Straight for this the boy fireman threw the improvised lasso. In that brief clearing of the smoke the crowd had seen him and cheered.

The rope was coiling through the air. It just missed the pole. Time was precious. Harry swiftly gathered it up and made a second throw. This time the noose settled over the end of the pole. In that instant Harry knew that he had won success.

But the difficulty was not yet over. He had established communication with the pole far above the roar and reach of the flames. But there were six small children and their mother to in some manner convey across that rope and to the ground. How was this to be done?

But his brother firemen had anticipated his wants and already placed a ladder against the pole.

This decided Harry.

Securing the other end of the rope to the window ledge, he took one of the children up in his arms.

Unloosing his fireman's belt, he passed it about the child's body under the arms and then strapped the buckle and other end under and over his right shoulder.

Speaking reassuring words to the little one, he swung himself over the window ledge.

His scheme was a success.

Hand over hand he made his way along the rope until the telegraph pole was reached.

Here the child was taken tenderly by another fireman, and passed safely down the ladder to the ground.

Six times High Ladder Harry crossed the rope, and then the question arose as to how the mother, who was much heavier, was to be conveyed across.

But it was accomplished by the young fireman's skillful direction.

A second rope was carried from the ladder to the window, and Mrs. Jensen, which was the woman's name, was drawn across by securing the rope to her waist and doubling it about Harry's body, while he remained in the chamber, where the flames had now encroached to such a degree that several times his clothing caught fire.

But, with the safe crossing of Mrs. Jensen, the wonderful feat of humanity was accomplished.

It now only remained for High Ladder Harry to cross the rope to the telegraph pole and descend to an enthusiastic reception by the cheering crowd.

But all this had been accomplished at the expense of some time, and in the face of such a fire in such a deathtrap of a building time was all in all. Harry remained at his post until the last moment, and just too long for absolute safety.

Suddenly a new section of the wall fell in. This left the corner tottering, and Harry was visible for a moment amid a dense cloud of falling bricks and blinding smoke. Then he slid out upon the rope.

But the corner of the building was already tottering, and the weight of the young fireman was just enough to overbalance it. An awful cry went up from the crowd.

"He is lost!"

For an instant the air was filled with a mighty crash, and the whirling, mighty clouds of smoke and flame. Then the strong wind cleared it away and a thrilling sight was revealed.

Hanging by less than a dozen feet of the rope from the telegraph pole was the brave rescuer.

He had just time spared him to nearly reach the end of the rope ere the building fell in. As it was, he had not escaped unscathed.

A mighty hoarse roar of joy and gladness went up. The ladder was crowded with firemen who tenderly lifted the brave rescuer from his perilous position to the ground in safety. They were none too soon, for High Ladder Harry's brain was reeling with faintness from the effect of terrible injuries.

Before he reached the ground he had relapsed into a fainting spell. The excitement was intense. Doctors were upon the spot and quickly attended the wounded hero. The crowd only was relieved when the verdict was announced that the young fireman's wounds were not likely to prove fatal.

The truth was, Harry had a narrow escape from certain death. When the wall fell he was not beyond the reach of the bricks, many of which struck him. More than all this, the flames had burned his clothing half off his body, his flesh was scorched and blistered, and his lungs were filled with smoke. Only a miracle had preserved his life.

As he lay there with the doctors about him the crowd gave way. A carriage with a white-faced lady in it was urged to the spot. The lady leaped out, and, rushing forward, threw herself upon Harry's unconscious form, crying:

"My son—my darling son! Oh, tell me that he is not dead!"

The crowd, as a body, would have liked to do for the wounded young fireman, but the mother's right was prior, so Harry was placed in the family carriage and driven to his home.

Of course the best of attendance was given him, and he rallied quickly. Visitors were not permitted to see him, and he was left alone with his mother, who watched over him devotedly.

For a day or two Harry was extremely weak, and his wounds pained him. But he was soon able to be about the house, and spent much of his time with his mother. Inquiries of a friendly nature poured in upon him from all sides, and Harry felt truly that his friends were legion.

He spent much time with his mother discussing the perfidy of Bertrand, who had not shown himself at Wilton Hall for many days. Indeed, while they were discussing him he made his unwelcome appearance.

The door opened and he stood upon the threshold of the room in which Harry and his mother were. Both started up and were impressed with the villain's surly attitude and blood-shot gaze.

"What do you want, John Bertrand?" asked Harry, tersely and sharply. The villain's face flushed angrily.

"Is that any of your business?" he snapped. "Can I not come and go in this house as freely as I choose? You must not forget, my fine young coxcomb, that I am your stepfather. You shall yield me respect."

"Respect!" exclaimed Harry, with a ring of contempt in his voice. "You dare ask for respect, John Bertrand, a miserable, graceless wretch like you? Why, you are not worthy the respect tendered a dog."

Bertrand was thoroughly maddened.

"You dare to insult me, you young puppy!" he yelled, fiercely. "I will teach you a lesson in civility, curse you!"

He rushed angrily upon Harry, but with a scream Mrs. Bertrand sprang between them.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE WARNING.

It was likely that in his mad fit John Bertrand would have attempted to do Harry Wilton harm; but Mrs. Bertrand interposed with white face and flashing eyes.



"Back, John Bertrand!" she cried, grandly. "It is true that the law will call you my husband still, but you have long since forfeited the moral right. Nevertheless, you have no right to attack my son in so brutal a manner in this house."

Bertrand paused, but his frame quivered with brutal passion. He fell back sullenly.

"He is very uncivil to me," he said, harshly. "One thing is certain. We must surely live apart, Eunice, if he remains longer under our roof."

Mrs. Bertrand's bosom rose and fell with tumultuous emotions. Harry would have replied to this, but she restrained him.

"I am glad you have broached the subject," she said, forcibly. "It is well to have an understanding at once. A separation is what I desire and shall seek, and I believe I have sufficient evidence of legal sort to accomplish that end. We will proceed without delay in the matter."

The effect of this upon Bertrand was most frightful to witness. His coarse face, inflamed with the color of a beet, was contorted and disfigured with varied emotions. A hiss malevolently escaped his lips.

"I can see through it," he gritted hoarsely. "This is all a cut-and-dried plan to oust me. Your son, Mrs. Bertrand, has plainly alienated your affections from me. He is responsible, and shall pay for it."

Harry could contain himself no longer. He pushed his way forward, and faced Bertrand with stern gaze.

"We need discuss this subject no further, John Bertrand," he said in a voice of steel. "You are unworthy the affection or the sympathy of anyone. The estate left by my father in trust for me, happily includes this house and grounds. I shall soon come into possession of it, but I waive all ceremony, and forbid you the door. Go now, and never come back here, or I will appeal to the law to have you taken care of."

Bertrand's evil eyes shone brightly. He laughed a low scornful laugh.

"That is all very pretty," he said, "but it does not intimidate me in the least. If I leave this house she will go with me."

He indicated Mrs. Bertrand, who shrank back with loathing.

"Heaven forbid!" she murmured.

"I shall consult a lawyer this very day," said Harry, with flushed face. "I warn you, John Bertrand, that you are on the wrong track, and your reward will be ruin and death."

The young fireman longed to openly betray his knowledge of the villain's intimacy with Bella Benson, but a second thought restrained him.

It occurred to him that an admirable opportunity offered itself to find quite warrantable grounds for papers of separation, which would free his mother from a curse. By remaining silent and watchful, he could detect Bertrand and his colleagues in the robbery of the bank, which they contemplated. By doing this, it would place Bertrand for the greater part of his life where he could do them no further injury, namely, behind prison bars.

All this flashing through his mind restrained Harry, so that he kept silent and ignored Bertrand's glance of hatred and vengeance. The villain's eyes gleamed with a sudden shrewd inspiration. He changed the tone of his voice and said, in an oily manner:

"You would like to get rid of me, I know, both of you. But I'm a hard one to shake off."

"The law provides a way," said Harry.

"Not yet. You have no legal grounds for a divorce as yet. So far as that goes I have the best of the situation. But I am not unreasonable. I know you don't like me, and I am willing to go if you wish me to."

Harry partly turned in surprise, but this was banished as Bertrand continued:

"But I cannot, of course, give up the very elegant home which I have here without some little consideration. You, Mrs. Bertrand, have tired of me. Your son wishes me at the other end of the earth. He has the money in trust. Let him secure to me fifty thousand dollars of the property and I will go to a foreign land and agree never to trouble you again in life. This is fair."

Words cannot depict the anger, contempt and scorn of Harry Wilton at that moment. He towered over the audacious scoundrel.

"My mother has been vilely duped in marrying you," he said, proudly. "And I would like to see her free. But there is a surer and safer method than paying you money. I am not a fool, John Bertrand. But I care to talk with you no further. Oblige me by leaving us."

"Oh, certainly," said the villain, with mock suavity. "You reject my offer now, but you will gladly accept it after I have plunged you deeper into disgrace. This is not our last meeting, Mr. Harry Wilton—not our last by any means. Don't forget that."

The door closed behind him and Harry drew a breath of relief. But his mother was in tears.

"Oh, Harry, you cannot know the burden upon my heart," she moaned. "Oh, that I should have allowed him to so deceive me!"

"Mother," said Harry, nobly, "you must not yield to self-reproach. You have been basely betrayed, but I am young and strong, and I have conviction of right. Let me fight the battle for you, and I will forfeit my life but I will free you from the hateful bondage this man has imposed upon you."

Harry strained her loved form to his bosom, and then, kissing her fondly like a lover, he turned to the door.

"I am going out a little while," he said. "Oh, do not say nay. I have quite recovered my strength, mother."

But she held him a moment longer.

"Oh, Harry," she said, "I do so fear for you. I wish that you would leave that fire company. Pardon me, but I fear that you will be killed. You are so foolishly brave; you court danger. Besides, you are far above the calling of a fireman."

"Mother," said Harry, reprovingly, "I hope I shall never feel above any honest and honorable occupation, though it be menial," then, with a light laugh: "But your fears are only fancies, my dear mother. You ask of me too much. Hook and Ladder No. 2 is very dear to me."

He bent and kissed her once again, and then passed from the room. She was left in a frame of mind happy in the love of her son, but with a foreboding of some strange evil.

Once again Harry had determined to visit a lawyer and obtain advice as to what steps his mother should take to procure a separation from the man who had so basely deceived her.

But, as before, his errand was not fulfilled, owing to a series of startling incidents.

He passed out of the grounds surrounding the Wilton homestead and made his way rapidly downtown, until he was on the chief business street of Freeport.

His mind was so busily occupied that he scarcely heeded things about him until suddenly an inspiring sound caught his hearing. It was music, which seemed to him at that moment almost celestial, the full, sweet tones of a feminine voice raised in song.

The roar of the busy street, the rattle of vehicles could not drown that wonderful voice, and Harry raised his eyes to see a crowd collected by a street corner. Pressing through it, he saw a young girl poorly clad, but beautiful as a dream, singing a wild, beautiful melody, which entranced one.

By her side stood an old man whose sad, calm face and vacant, meaningless glance betrayed him an imbecile. Yet there



was a patrician cast to his features, a certain noble bearing which bespoke better days and won one's sympathy.

"It is she!" he exclaimed in a strangely thrilled voice. "Heavens! how very beautiful she is. And such a voice!"

Leda Lee, the street singer, and her foster father it was, and the young girl's face, even as she sang, increased its rich color as she saw Harry. They exchanged glances for an instant and then she averted her gaze and her voice faltered a trifle.

Harry at an unobserved moment dropped a silver dollar into the hat held by the old man. Then he passed on, making his way out of the crowd.

But the last stanza of the wonderful song had died out, and Harry heard light footsteps behind him.

"Oh, sir," said a sweet voice, "I beg of you to allow me to speak to you of something—something important."

Harry turned instantly and took Leda's hand in his. She was confused for an instant, but managed to stammer:

"I have waited all day upon the street to see you. Oh, I must tell you something dreadful! There is a great danger hanging over you. I fear for you—oh, I fear for you!"

Words cannot express High Ladder Harry's amazement. For a moment he could not speak.

"Danger?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, Leda? I do not understand you."

"I—I will tell you all," she said, "but not here. Come with me. I must bring my father. Will you come?"

"With all my heart," said Harry, who was bewildered with the wondrous beauty of her violet eyes. He followed her back to the spot where Samuel Lee awaited her. Then Leda placed her foster father's hand in Harry's and said:

"This is my father, Harry Wilton. I have told him how you rescued us so bravely from the roof of the Columbia Hotel."

Harry took Samuel Lee's hand in his. The old man's words of gratitude impressed him deeply, he scarcely knew why.

A few remarks were exchanged and then Leda said:

"We will go into some quiet place. Ah, there is the park. We can be secluded there, and I will tell you all."

They crossed the street and entered the park. Here in a retired spot a settee was found, and, seating themselves, Leda turned her glorious eyes once more upon Harry and began:

"You have not forgotten the night Jack Benson attacked me, and you were so kind as to take my part. Well, the villain has followed me ever since, and I have been in terrible fear. Only the other night he was behind me when I was making my way through a dark street."

"The wretch!" exclaimed Harry, indignantly.

"He would have overtaken me, but I skipped into a doorway and crouched down. It was a secure hiding-place, and he passed me by in the search several times.

"I was shivering in great fear when suddenly I heard voices and saw that he was talking with another man whose face I could not see. They drew up in the shadows near me. I could have touched them, and the conversation I heard horrified me.

"Benson addressed the other man as John, and they talked about you. Their curses were frightful, and it was agreed between them that you should be killed. By killing you it was said that a large sum of money could in some way be obtained. I was nigh fainting with horror and fear, but finally they moved along, and I got safely away. I have been looking for you since to warn you, for I know they meant what they said."

Harry listened spellbound to every word of the street singer's story. He felt the veins tingle in his fingertips even. He did not speak for some moments.

There was no doubt in his mind that the man with Benson was John Bertrand; he realized that the plot was certainly

on foot to take his life. They were unscrupulous men and would not hesitate at any deed of crime.

The advantage to Bertrand was easily recognizable to Harry. Once he (Harry) was out of the way, as the Wilton family had no living heirs, the property held in trust must revert to himself, Bertrand, and to Mrs. Bertrand. It was a frightful thing to contemplate.

Harry set his white lips firmly.

"Leda, you have rendered me a great service," he said. "I cannot thank you enough. I shall be upon my guard."

The street singer's slender form trembled violently, and she put one soft hand into Harry's. The touch thrilled him.

"Oh, I hope that no harm will befall you," she said. "You have been so kind to me that—that I feel an interest in you. You will need to be very careful, they are such wicked men. They will surely kill you."

"Happily there is a law, which provides punishment for such men," declared Harry forcibly. "And as I live, they shall feel its weight."

All this while Samuel Lee had been listening intently, but he did not show by any look or action that a single word was comprehensive. For the first time he spoke, passing a hand wearily across his brow.

"Strange that I cannot remember where that gold is," he said vaguely, solemnly. "Heaps of shining gold. What happiness it would bring if I could only find it! Ah! my poor old head has failed me. If I could only remember!"

Then he relapsed into a deep study, while Leda exchanged glances with Harry. There was a light of sadness in her beautiful eyes.

"Poor old man," she said softly, "my heart goes out to him. I could leave him if I chose and seek higher employment than singing in the streets, but he would meet with ill treatment, I feel sure, and when I recall that he took me, a helpless waif, and tenderly brought me up and cared for me, I could not feel nearer to my own father than to him. It is only within a few years that he has been wholly imbecile. Two years ago he possessed his full faculties, except that he could not remember the past. But this cloud has come over him since, and we were driven into the street to make a living as best we could. People are very kind to me; few are unkind, but—ah, I cannot tell you how I have hoped for a home, where I could seek refuge and feel truly that I was not dependent upon the world's charity."

Harry was deeply impressed. He was not blind to the fact that Leda Lee was no ordinary sort of a girl.

"Leda," he cried impulsively. "Your voice is your fortune. I am more interested in you than you can know. Let me help you to rise. My mother will willingly take you under her care and you shall be my sister. As for your father—"

But the young girl sprung up with a strange light in her beautiful eyes.

"No, no," she said firmly. "I could not accept of your kind offer. I must make my own fight with the world. 'Tis true the burden is sometimes hard to bear, yet I may be grateful that it is not harder. Thank you for your kindness—I shall pray for you. Goodby."

With the old man's hand in hers she started quickly away, flashing Harry back an indescribable glance which puzzled him. He stood like one in a dream and watched her out of sight.

"What wondrous beauty," he murmured. "She is very beautiful and very strange. I do not understand her. And that old man interests me strangely—I know not why. Ah, well, life has mysteries far too deep for the human mind to solve."

The young fireman's reverie was but transient, and the street singer and her aged companion had barely vanished from sight when it was suddenly interrupted. Harry heard a footstep in the rear and turned to be rewarded with a great



surprise. A woman, whose features were familiar to him, stood before him.

It was Bella Benson.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE COMPACT.

Harry could not have received a greater surprise. A variety of startled thoughts flashed through his mind. For a moment he could not speak, but stood gazing vacantly at the scheming woman.

She stood before him with a queer smile upon her face, and she was the first to speak.

"No doubt you are surprised to meet me here, Harry Wilton," she said, "but I have long desired a private talk with you, and, seeing you enter the park, I followed you with that end in view. You will scarcely deny me."

"You followed me?" exclaimed Harry, instinctively, wondering if she had overheard his talk with Leda and her warning.

"I took that liberty," replied the woman.

"Please to state your business with me," said Harry, with dignity.

She indulged in a rippling laugh.

"I can assure you that it is of some importance," she said. "I need only say that it concerns your own father, who went to California so many years ago."

"My own father!" exclaimed Harry, with a gasp of surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Then you will listen to an important proposition which I shall make to you."

Harry drew himself up stiffly. He distrusted her purpose strongly.

"I can only say right here," he said coldly, "that I do not care to receive any proposition from you, or to enter into any arrangements of any sort. You have followed me here to no purpose, for I will have nothing to do with you at all."

"And why, may I ask?" said the woman, opening her eyes in pretended astonishment.

"Certainly," replied Harry. "I know you to be a dishonest, evil woman. With such I can have no dealings."

The young fireman regretted this denunciation the moment it was uttered, as a prudent reflection showed him that it was not only uncivil but indiscreet, despite its very truth.

"I will ask your pardon and retract that statement, which was hastily made," he rejoined, quickly. "I simply do not care to have any dealings with you."

Bella Benson's face flushed crimson.

"I am sure you could not mean that," she said, quickly. "A gentleman will never so rudely address one of the opposite sex. Despite my reputation and character in the past, there is no reason why you should not treat me with civility at least, for I am now able to do you a great service."

The natural impulse which Harry felt was to leave the spot; but our hero, like all human beings, was not free from a certain element of curiosity, which was singularly stimulated.

"A service?" he exclaimed. "Pray, what service? Please explain."

"When I have explained you will regret your harsh judgment of me."

"Well?"

"Whatever I have been in the past," said Bella, simulating pathos, "can have nothing to do with my conduct in the future. I have tired of my worldly life and would like to live the remainder of my life as a good woman should. Not that I ever was strictly bad. But, alas! it is hard for one to reform

exposed, as I am, to all the old temptations. While I remain in poverty I shall be continually exposed. If I had a respectable sum of money to meet a few wants, I could rise above my present condition and keep up. If you should agree to give me the sum I ask in return for valuable consideration, you would not only be serving your own ends, but performing a Christian act in helping a downfallen woman to arise."

Harry was struck with the force of this argument. There was something like sincerity in the woman's voice and manner. His impulsive, generous nature as well as his curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"So it is money you want?" he said, calmly. "There is logic in your proposition, but what consideration have you that will be so very valuable to me?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Bella Benson went on.

"Supposing you were to know that your own father, whom you supposed dead and buried in California, was yet alive? What would you say to that?"

Harry's heart gave a wild leap. For an instant hope was revived in his breast, but it was quickly superseded by incredulity.

"No," he said. "My father is dead. That cannot be."

"How do you know that he is dead?"

"It is very easy to see. If he was alive, think he would have remained absent so long as this?"

"Supposing circumstances over which he had no control compelled him to?"

"That is not likely."

"You are incredulous?"

"Yes."

"Then nothing remains but for me to declare that such is a fact, and that I can bring your father to you alive and well."

The woman spoke impressively, but Harry did not credit her statement. It was his earnest belief that she was only formulating some scheme of which he was not yet cognizant.

"How can you prove this wonderful thing to me?" he asked calmly.

"I will prove it to you, and as I said before restore to you your father alive and well, if——"

"What?"

"You will pay me a certain sum of money."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Harry drew a deep breath. He gazed at the woman piercingly.

"You think that I cannot penetrate your duplicity, Bella Benson," he said forcibly. "But you cannot deceive me. I know your game well. You speak of reform. Dare you deny that you are even now in collusion with John Bertrand for the committing of a certain bank robbery?"

Had Bella Benson been less the hardened woman of the world and a perfect master of herself, she would have been self-betrayed then and there. But, though the effect of Harry's telling shot was powerful, she scarcely betrayed it in her manner, though her face paled a trifle.

"I know not by what means you obtained that information," she said. "But I am glad you mentioned it, for it will give me an admirable opportunity to prove my honesty to you. Yes, it is true that John Bertrand fancies that I will assist him in the robbery, but I have no idea of doing so. On the other hand, I will assist you to detect the villain in the crime, so that he may be brought to justice. You desire to free your mother from his claim upon her. This is your opportunity. I am sincere in the matter. I tell you once for all that I acquits with John Bertrand and my life of the past. I mean to live a new and better life."

Harry did not speak for some moments. He was doing



some tall thinking. He was yet distrustful of the woman, but an idea had occurred to him. Why not meet her half way and take her at her own game? It was a splendid opportunity, and in that instant his mind was made up. So he feigned deep interest.

"You are sincere in this?" he asked, eagerly.

The woman's eyes sparkled, as she fancied that she had won her point. She made reply:

"I swear it faithfully!"

"That is enough. I will try you. First, you shall betray John Bertrand to me. When is the robbery to be attempted?"

"This very night."

"Ah! What bank is it?"

"The First National!"

"Good! I will meet you with officers anywhere you may say."

"No; you must come alone."

"What?"

"I have no objection to you having officers within easy call; but I shall be with Bertrand, and I want you to follow my directions implicitly; otherwise it will not be a success."

Harry bowed quietly. He saw that it was best to acquiesce in everything, yet he had decided to act independently.

"Very well," he said; "the terms are made. You will prove yourself to me by trapping Bertrand. I will then have no reason to distrust you. If you do restore my own father to me alive and well you will have more than the ten thousand dollars, which I will willingly pay—you will have my life gratitude."

"Then the matter is settled," said Bella. "We will talk no further. You are to meet me tonight at eleven in the alley back of the bank. Be on your guard."

"I will."

"And now I will leave you. Remember, tonight, at eleven. Farewell."

She glided away with light step through the shrubbery, leaving High Ladder Harry in a most singular frame of mind.

"It must now be plot and counter plot," he declared in an undertone, and experiencing a strange excitement. "A good deal depends on this night's work. Perhaps she will be too sharp for me, but I think not. In one thing at least I have deceived her. She thinks she has won my confidence. Yes, I will be on hand at eleven tonight and—well, we shall see."

High Ladder Harry was not far wrong in the apprehension, that eleven o'clock that night would bring developments of a most sensational and thrilling character.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR AT THE ENGINE HOUSE.

It would be a misstatement of facts to assert that Harry was not in a slight measure inspired with a hope, if not actual belief, that Bella Benson was sincere.

It was by no means impossible that the woman really desired to turn over a new leaf, and ten thousand dollars would certainly seem a sufficient inducement for her to prove traitorous to Bertrand, who had not by any means proved himself loyal in friendship to her.

So that the young fireman, the more he studied the matter, became more deeply impressed with the logic of this reasoning.

Therefore he committed a mistake which was quite natural under the circumstances. This was in not consulting with the police and having a strong guard on hand at eleven o'clock that night.

"If I go to the police," he mused, "they may not take the

view that I do of this matter. It will not be easy for me to explain to them why Bella Benson is not identified with the robbery as much as Bertrand. I believe my best plan is to paddle my own canoe, and go single-handed. I am a match for Bertrand, and if there is any treachery—well, I should be able to take care of myself."

The more he pondered upon the matter the more determined he became to go single-handed. In this state of mind he left the park, and, crossing the main thoroughfare, turned into another street.

It was in this street that the house of Hook and Ladder No. 2 was situated, and hither Harry bent his footsteps.

The shades of evening were falling fast, and Harry, as he approached the fire station, saw the doors were wide open.

"Ah, I understand," he said. "This is the day that Jim takes to clean up things."

He approached the doors and saw the dim outlines of the truck with its gilt and silver trimmings. At the far end he saw the light of a lantern.

Without the slightest suspicion Harry boldly entered the place. He could see nobody as yet, but confident that it was Jim Keene, the veteran, who was there, he cried, cheerily:

"Well, Jim, old pard, how are you? I didn't expect to find you here."

To the young fireman's surprise no answer came back. Was the place deserted?

Harry pushed along toward the lantern, which set upon a bench. As he did so there was the sudden scurrying sound of footsteps in the lower end of the place, and then all was still again.

The thought of thieves came to Harry, and without a moment's consideration he started in pursuit. But when he reached the lower end of the house there was no evidence of the presence of anybody. Yet an open window showed the means of escape.

Harry sprang to this, and thrust his head out just in time to see a dark form shrink into the shadows of an alley.

Instantly the young fireman turned back and rushed around to the street to cut off the thief, if possible. Dashing out of the engine house he reached the corner of the alley just in time to meet a man who came out hurriedly.

It was just in the light of a street lamp and both started back with a sharp cry.

Jack Benson and High Ladder Harry stood face to face. For a moment not a word was spoken. Then Harry exclaimed:

"Oh, it's you, is it, Jack Benson?"

The young villain scowled.

"Well, what of it? What do you want?"

"I want to know what you were doing in the engine house just now?"

"In the engine-house?" said Benson, affecting surprise.

"Yes."

"What's the matter with you? I haven't been in the engine house."

"Dare you deny it?"

"Of course I do."

Harry gazed sharply into the villain's face. In his own mind he was well satisfied that it was Benson who had rushed out of the place in such a suspicious manner. But the villain had nothing in his hands, so it would not seem that he had been thieving.

"I have reason to believe that you were in there just now," said Harry sternly. "I think I saw you jump out of the rear window, and there is nobody else in the alley at present. I merely wished to know what you wanted there."

"The next time make sure it was me," said Benson with an oath. "I am not such a flat as you think I am, and I'll come square with you for this. Get out of my way!"



Harry allowed him to pass, and then turned back to the engine house. At the door he met Jim Keene.

"Hello, Harry!" cried the veteran. "Have you been here before?"

"Yes, I was here a moment ago and found somebody in here."

With this Harry related the peculiar incident. Jim listened with surprise. He declared that he had stepped into an adjoining store for some tobacco, never suspecting that anybody was in the engine room.

Somewhat alarmed, they made a careful inspection of the truck and everything in the house; but nothing was found missing or out of order.

What could Benson possibly want in the place? The affair mystified Harry not a little, and held a significance of which they little dreamed at the moment. All discussion, however, could result in no satisfactory explanation whatever.

"That is mighty queer," declared Jim Keene. "I'll take a closer look by daylight."

Harry did not go home that evening, but concluded to remain until eleven, the appointed hour of his meeting with Bella Benson at the engine house.

He could always find plenty of diversion in a social chat with Jim Keene, and many a thrilling episode of fireman life they talked over.

At length Harry heard the hour of eleven pealed from the city clocks, and bidding Jim good-night, he left the engine house.

Freeport was a poor-lighted city, and boasted of a small police force. In the entire distance to the First National Bank, Harry saw no sign of an officer. He kept well in the shadow so that he might not be seen, and soon reached the alley where he was to meet Bella Benson.

The bank building was a large structure of brick, some seven stories high, in fact, being the highest building in Freeport.

The ground floor was occupied by business houses, stores, and shops. Upon the second floor was the bank, with its fireproof vault and safes, containing many thousands of dollars.

The upper stories were devoted to offices and bachelor apartments. Back of the immense building was an alley twenty feet broad. It was in this alley that Harry was to meet the woman.

All was Stygian gloom in the place as Harry approached. He did not enter the alley boldly, for although brave, the young fireman was never foolishly reckless.

He halted just at the corner, however, and listened. He was in deep shadow himself, but the blackness of the alley was deeper. He was at the appointed place. Would the appointment be kept?

Harry had just asked himself this question when there was a rustling sound near him, and a whisper came to his ears.

"Are you there?"

It was Bella Benson herself, and she stood before the young fireman. His heart beat rapidly, and with an effort to suppress his excitement, he said, in reply:

"Yes. I am on hand, as you see."

"Good! I feared you would not come."

"I never break an engagement," declared Harry.

"Where are the officers?"

"I did not bring them."

"That is good. You acted wisely. I have only to say that Bertrand is in the building now at work on the big safe, and I am left here to watch."

Harry was intensely excited.

"Shall I not give the alarm?"

"What for?"

"Why, to have him arrested. I will call an officer."

"No."

"Why not?"

"First come with me," said the woman. "If we do not proceed carefully they will take the alarm and fly. You have nothing to fear. Come with me."

Harry followed her through the alley and to a gate in the high board fence. Through this they passed, across a yard, and to a door which opened upon a narrow flight of stairs.

"They burned out this lock," declared Bella Benson. "You can go up these stairs and you will be in the bank proper. I will wait here and give warning."

Harry felt nothing like fear now, and thoroughly carried away with the adventure of the affair obeyed and crept on up the stairs. Arrived at the landing he passed silently through an open door, and was behind the wire screen of the cashier's desk.

On the other side by the dim light of a dark lantern he saw two men at the open doors of a big safe. The sight gave him a mighty thrill.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A VILLAINOUS PLOT.

Harry Wilton stood for some moments gazing at the bank robbers unable to move hand or foot. It was a thrilling moment, and he could not at once make up his mind how to act.

He could not see their faces, for they were closely muffled, but he knew that one of them was John Bertrand. When he recovered himself finally his first impulse was to spring forward and denounce them. But this would have been an act of indiscretion, and he with difficulty restrained himself.

They were working rapidly, and Harry saw that they had succeeded as yet only in opening the outer doors of the big safe. It was the inner doors they were at work upon now.

That they would eventually succeed there was no doubt. Something must be done at once. But what? Harry now saw his mistake in not having brought officers with him.

Even should he succeed in worsting the robbers single-handed it would not be easy for him to call assistance or give the alarm. In fact, he was in a complete quandary as to what it was best to do.

There was but one method of procedure that he could at present see, and this was to summon officers as speedily as possible, without betraying his presence to the robbers.

With his mind made up fully to this effect he began to move silently away from his position by the wire screen. All was darkness in his rear, and he experienced a strange thrill when a peculiar noise came to his hearing, a sound which quickly explained itself.

The heavy oaken door had closed behind him. For a moment he was startled.

Who had closed it?

Was this a trap?

No agency save a draught of air or human hands could have done this thing. Hastily, though noiselessly, he retreated to the door, and placed his hands upon it in the darkness.

It would not yield as he pushed against it. He turned the knob easily, but even then the door would not yield. Harry placed his ear to the keyhole and heard light footsteps on the stairs.

His whole startled being was aroused now. It was certainly the work of the scheming woman, Bella Benson, and a cut and dried plan to entrap him.

His bosom swelled, and his nerves became steel. They would not conquer him without a hard fight. Yet his position was desperate. Alone and with no weapon of any kind



in that bank, the walls of which were as thick as those of a vault, he might shout for help in vain. His cries could not penetrate them, and if a victor, all must depend upon his own strength and efforts.

To add to the very desperation of his position, the light of the dark lantern disappeared, and all was silence and a darkness which could almost be felt in the vault of the bank.

Harry remained perfectly motionless by the door. There was a strong impulse uppermost in his mind to throw his weight against the door, but he yet entertained a hope that the robbers were not aware of his presence. This was almost instantly dispelled.

Outside the bank windows a sharp, peculiar whistle was heard. Then there was a movement by the safe, and a hoarse voice said:

"The trap is sprung, Jack."

High Ladder Harry would indeed have been obtuse had not the whole game been apparent to him now. Bella Benson was a deeper woman than he had given her credit for. It was truly a subtle and master mind in villainy which had engineered this most clever scheme. Harry now wondered why he had been so blind as not to have seen through her game at once.

"What a fool I have been," he muttered under his breath. "I should have known better than to trust her. All of her talk about my father's return alive from California and her betrayal of Bertrand was buncombe. I am in a trap, but unless there are more than two of them in the place I will yet win."

He set his teeth firmly, and was satisfied that the woman had, by means of the whistle, apprised the bank robbers of the fact that their foe was entrapped. Nothing could have worked better. Harry alone was to blame. He had almost knowingly walked into the trap. It was only a clever game of Bella's to keep him from preventing the robbery of the bank. What they would do with him was not yet clear, but that they would attempt his life was by no means improbable.

With the whistle signal, and with the assertion of one of the robbers that "the trap is sprung," Harry realized that further concealment was all unnecessary. Therefore, he turned and threw his weight against the door. His hope was to force it open and call for help. But it would not yield.

"Quick, Jack! Don't give him a chance!" cried one of the robbers in a voice which the young fireman recognized as Bertrand's. "Hold there! Hands up, or you're a dead man! There's no escape for ye! Hands up!"

Again the dark-lantern's rays illumined the place, but this time it was the outer room, and Harry Wilton stood revealed in its light. Two masked men, one of them with a pistol, stood before him.

"You're cornered!" cried the man with the lantern. "You might as well give up, Harry Wilton. Ha, ha! my time has come at last!"

"Never, Jack Benson!" cried Harry, in a ringing voice, as he now recognized the villain in spite of his mask. "On the contrary, the advantage is mine. I have caught you both in the act of committing a crime which cannot fail to give you a twenty-year sentence in prison. I hold the upper hand—not you."

There was a harsh, discordant laugh, and John Bertrand hissed a reply.

"Do you take us for fools, Harry Wilton? If so you have made a grand mistake. We have the best of you, and no bluff game will work here."

"You cannot deny your guilt."

"No, but you will never be able to give evidence against us. You are in a fine trap. It will be useless for you to shout or struggle. Nobody will hear you—nobody come to your aid. What do you think of it now?"

"I think this is a diabolical scheme upon your part which will never work. It is true that you have trapped me, but I am not subdued. I promise you a hard fight."

"You are a fool!"

"I would be a fool to submit with fear to your demands."

"It is folly for you to resist."

"We shall see."

"I can shoot you down like a dog."

"You will hardly dare to do that," said Harry, with an iron courage. "The report will go beyond the walls and call the police. I do not fear that. If you kill me, as I firmly believe that you intend doing, it must be a hand-to-hand struggle. We have had a little experience in that line before, Jack Benson, with what result you well know. You have trapped me—now take me if you can."

Harry's gaze had wandered about the place and had encountered but one object which he fancied he could use as a weapon of defense. This was a chair, and with a quick spring he seized it and whirled it aloft.

The two villains hesitated.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Benson, sullenly, "he is right about the pistol, John. There is no way but to grapple with him."

"Well, grapple it is," cried Bertrand, with a savage curse. "We have gone too far now to go back. If we do not kill the little puppy we will go up for twenty years. Don't take any chances, Jack."

"Come on, the both of you," cried Harry, with ringing voice, "I defy you."

"Take him on the right, John."

"All right."

"Now—ready!"

Benson placed the lantern on the cashier's desk and both men crept like wolves upon the object of their hatred.

As for Harry, he stood with his back against the wall and watched them closely.

He whirled the chair aloft and watched for his opportunity. Both villains he knew to be cowards, though they were now in a desperate frame of mind.

"Now, Jack, jump on him!" cried Bertrand.

Benson made a rush forward. Luckless rascal! Quicker than thought Harry leaped straight between them, and the chair was whirled about him like a tremendous battle-ax. It took Benson over the right ear, and he did not stop tumbling until he reached a far end of the room. Bertrand recoiled, and Harry regained his position, not seeking to follow up his advantage. The first round had resulted in his favor. Benson, foaming at the mouth, was upon his feet.

But at that moment a startling sound rang out upon the night air, which caused Bertrand to clutch Benson's arm.

Clang—clang—clang!

The fire bells! Loud and clear and thrilling they rang out upon the night air. The sound acted upon High Ladder Harry like an inspiration. He could hardly control himself.

"By the gods of war, Jack," cried John Bertrand excitedly, "Bella has got in her work for a certainty. Hurrah! Now for victory!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### A HORRIBLE FATE.

The words of the arch villain were an instant revelation to Harry Wilton. Now he recalled vividly to mind the conversation he had overheard between his recreant stepfather and Bella Benson, not many days since, with regard to an incen-



diary conflagration, in some other part of the city, to draw suspicion from the bank.

The plot had worked to perfection. It was mainly owing to the shrewd and masterful work of Bella Benson, who, as Harry was now plainly aware, had immediately set out for the fulfillment successfully of her incendiary purposes, after locking him into the bank building.

Every nerve, every vein in his body impelled him to go to that fire, wherever it was. But this he was unable to do.

His foes yet faced him. He must first overcome them. But the fireman's spirit of duty so inherent in his nature lent him strength, and Harry was determined to settle the battle one way or the other in very quick time.

"Clang—clang!"

The fire-bells were ringing in wild alarm, and already a hoarse roar could be heard upon the street below as a fire company dashed past over the hard pavements. It was the first time in years that High Ladder Harry had not responded to the call. But this fire he was not destined to win distinction at, as he had in the past.

Already through the eastern windows of the bank a dull glare shone against the midnight sky.

The fire was well under way, and Harry longed for liberty to be there, but this was denied him.

Bertrand's cry of comprehension was blended with fiendish triumph.

"Now for victory."

A hoarse yell of approval came from Benson. He clenched his hands and rushed forward upon the young fireman. Murder and hatred was only uppermost in the villain's mind then.

Harry swung the chair aloft again, and made a blow at Benson. But this time the villain dodged it, and as it struck the heavy steam radiator it went to pieces.

A hoarse yell of triumph escaped Benson now, and both men threw themselves like tigers upon Harry.

The young fireman could only meet them with his fists, and with wonderful precision he let out a terrific blow from the shoulder which sent Bertrand to the floor. But in doing this he gave Benson an opportunity to grapple with him.

The next moment Bertrand recovered himself and rushed upon the young fireman.

Harry shook them off as a duck will shake off water from its back for a moment, but the two foes closed in on him so repeatedly that his arms became tired. In vain Harry tried to get in a telling blow that would render one of them hors de combat.

Had he succeeded in doing this victory must surely have been his.

But he failed, and, with mere weight the villains forced him back against the wall and finally to the floor.

Once underneath the young fireman realized that all hope was gone, yet he fought desperately.

But the odds were too great.

A sudden hard blow upon the head reduced him to insensibility, and thus he lay upon the marble floor, while his antagonists, puffing and cursing, arose to their feet.

"We've settled him, Jack."

"He ain't dead?"

"No."

As he said this Benson with an oath pulled a short knife from his pocket. It was his intention to kill his adversary then and there, but Bertrand placed a hand upon his arm.

"Ugh!" he said. "Don't do that. I don't like blood."

"What will you do then?"

"I have a better idea."

"What?"

"We will bind him hand and foot and leave him here. You know the rest. There is no salvation for him."

Benson replaced his knife.

"You are right!" he cried, fiendishly.

"He will also realize it better, for he will come to in a few moments."

"Give me the rope."

From a black bag which they had to carry the safe-breaking tools in they produced a rope.

With this Harry was tightly bound and gagged, and left lying upon the floor.

Then Benson leaped to his feet.

"We have just time to pry out that inner drawer," he said.

"That is where the money is kept."

"All right. But we must be quick about it."

"Quick is the word."

Both men went back to the safe, taking the dark lantern and leaving Harry in his unconsciousness. But he very soon revived, and became conscious of what was going on around him, although unable to move or speak.

He could plainly hear the villains at the safe, and his mind was flooded with curious thoughts.

He was not a little surprised. Why had they not killed him? It was something which he could only explain by the reasoning that they had a terrible fate in store for him, which was the truth.

The young fireman could plainly hear the creaking of the iron bar as the inner drawer of the safe was pried open, and his blood boiled. He madly desired liberty at the moment.

"Have you got the money, Jack?" asked Bertrand, in a low voice.

"Yes."

"How much is there?"

"Oh, a good, strong twenty thousand."

"Good! Now let's be off. We are in danger here now. Work lively."

Harry heard them close the doors of the safe, and then was conscious that the rays of the lantern were turned upon him.

"Is he all right, Jack?"

"Yes."

Then he heard their footsteps receding. The door opened and closed, and there was the click of the bolt plainly audible. What did it mean?

This was the question which Harry asked himself.

They had gone and left him there in that condition. What was their purpose? He cudgelled his brain in vain.

"They must know," he reflected, "that I shall certainly inform on them. Ah, well, I will find no fault for the sparing of my life."

With difficulty Harry managed to roll over.

He could see the light from the distant fire yet shining in at the bank windows, and which partly lit up its interior. He fancied that he could hear the shouts of the firemen.

"They will wonder what has become of me," he mused, painfully. "If they only knew where I was I would not be long in need of help."

But people at the fire in the distant quarter of the city that night never dreamed of the real reason why High Ladder Harry was not present as usual. It was well known that he was not present, for nobody dared to ascend the high ladder and rescue from the top story of the ill-fated tenement block a helpless young woman who was burned to death almost before the eyes of the shuddering crowd.

The daring young fireman's absence was felt, and many were the exclamations:

"Oh, if High Ladder Harry had only been here he would have saved her life."

One person in the vast throng alone guessed the real reason of Harry's absence and experienced a sickening sense of fear.



This was a beautiful, poorly-clad young girl, who stood in the verge of the throng with an agonized light in her eyes and prayed for the poor unfortunate who had so lucklessly fallen a victim to the flames.

Leda Lee never suspected the fact, however, that the firing of the tenement block was incendiary, and that it had been done by the hands of Bella Benson.

The whole dark plot had been carefully laid by the scheming woman. A few days previous she had hired a room in the block, and lived there a short period. In this room the fire had been set, and at an hour when it might spread disastrously before being discovered she had fired the building.

Her work was effectual, for scarce one timber would be left upon another, in spite of the brave efforts of the firemen.

"Can anything have happened to him?" Leda asked herself, thinking of High Ladder Harry. "I pray not. My warning cannot have been in vain."

Lying in the bank which had been so thoroughly ransacked by Bertrand and Benson, Harry Wilton in vain tried to free himself from his bonds.

He could not as yet understand the game of his enemies, but it became suddenly manifest to him in a manner so startling and horrible that he was nigh driven mad.

A sudden strange odor came into his nostrils. He could feel it float across the floor and diffuse itself about him.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "I am doomed!"

The room was rapidly filling with smoke. The building had been set on fire!

## CHAPTER X.

### TO THE RESCUE.

Leda Lee had been one of the first persons at the tenement house fire. Indeed, she had been instrumental in giving the alarm.

The lodgings of herself and her foster-father were in a house just across the way, and it was the light shining in the window upon her bed which had awakened her.

Instantly springing up, she had cried, in a terrified manner:

"My God! it is a fire."

She had but one thought, and this was to give the alarm. Dressing herself as hastily as possible, she ran screaming down to the street.

Her cries aroused inmates of both houses, and those in the burning tenement hastened to escape with their lives.

It was a scene baffling description. In a very few moments the street was choked with people and the fire apparatus.

A stream was gotten upon the fire as soon as possible, but the fire had got tremendous headway.

Leda, anxious and excited, looked for handsome Harry Wilton. But the brave fireman, as the reader already knows, was unable to be present.

Her fears for his safety were not without good grounds, as she was soon to learn, and as she stood in the crowd suddenly a woman whom she knew by repute brushed past her.

It was Bella Benson.

The incendiary had remained to view the success of her evil doings, and there was a light of positive devilish triumph in her eyes.

Leda shuddered as she noted this, and a sudden swift suspicion flashed over her.

She knew that the woman was a sister of Jack Benson. Why, she could not tell, she experienced a strange prescience that by following this woman she might perhaps learn something about Harry's whereabouts.

At first she had thought of asking her, and then she remembered that the woman would not compromise her own brother's interests.

At least I will watch her for a little while," she decided, mentally. "It can do no harm."

So, without further ado, she proceeded to follow her carefully through the crowd.

Bella Benson remained but a very few moments longer in the vicinity.

She moved away down a deserted street, and Leda was compelled to exercise great care in following her. For some ways they kept on, Leda shrinking into the shadows, until finally they arrived at the alley back of the First National Bank.

Here Leda was accorded a genuine surprise. Two men, one carrying a black bag, came out of the alley.

Leda trembled for fear of discovery, and shrank deeper into the shadows.

The two men appeared excited, and conversed with the woman in hoarse whispers. In vain Leda endeavored to catch the words.

At length, impelled by a powerful curiosity, she crept nearer. By so doing she gained her end.

"So you were successful?" Bella had asked breathlessly.

"Successful!" exclaimed her brother in a voice of excited triumph. "We could not hope for better luck."

"And you have got the money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"A good twenty thousand in cash."

"Good! That will keep the wolf from the door for awhile."

"You bet."

"But the young fellow?"

"He is safe."

"Dead."

"Oh, no! but fast on the road to the celestial sphere. He lies now on the bank floor bound hand and foot."

Then followed an inaudible explanation. Leda heard all this with a strange, awful terror tugging at her heart-strings.

"What can it all mean?" she thought, in a bewildered way. "They certainly have been doing some terrible thing. As I live, I believe they have robbed the bank."

She knew that the great building before her was the First National Bank. All flashed over her in a moment. But who was the man whom they had described as bound and gagged and left in the place?

She thought of High Ladder Harry. No, it could not be he. Beyond doubt it was the bank watchman.

A thousand vague and perplexing ideas flashed across her mind.

Suddenly one of the men exclaimed:

"As I live I have forgotten something! Wait here, Bella. Come with me, John."

The two men disappeared in the alley. So excited was Leda that she forgot herself wholly, and exposed herself in the full glare of the street lamp. Bella Benson turned just in time to see her.

A great cry escaped the woman's lips. With a spring like a tigress she descended upon Leda and clutched her arms, pinching them so severely that a cry of pain was elicited from the young girl's lips.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" almost shrieked the Benson woman. "Speak! Did you hear our talk?"

At first Leda had been paralyzed with terror; but she was far from being a coward, and her whole nature was now aroused.

"Unhand me!" she said, indignantly. "Let me go, I say!"

"Let you go?" hissed the older woman. "Why, I'll choke the life out of you! Who are you?"



There was a sharp, quick struggle, but Bella Benson was the stronger, and held Leda in a firm grasp.

The young girl panted and struggled in vain.

"Who are you? Tell me quick or I will choke you."

"I will never tell you," replied Leda.

"Did you overhear us?"

"I will never tell."

"We will see."

The woman forced the young girl back, and now in the light she saw her features. A great cry escaped her.

"What luck!" she exclaimed. "If it ain't Jack's pretty girl. Ha—ha—I will hold her until he comes. You know Jack Benson, don't you? Now tell me the truth. Did you overhear what we said? Tell me or I will give you up to him."

The young girl's horror of Benson was so fearful that she instantly replied:

"Yes, I heard it all."

"You did, eh?"

For a moment Bella Benson's face was contorted with fury and disappointment. She was at a loss to know just what to do.

"Will you ever tell of it?" she asked, sharply. "But that is folly. Of course you will. I don't know what to do. I'll wait until the others come."

Leda made another ineffectual attempt to free herself from the woman's grasp. How she repented her carelessness now in exposing herself to view.

"Look here!" said Bella, suddenly. "You're a poor girl. If you'll stand in with me and never tell of this to a living soul, I'll give you more money than you ever saw before. Say the word."

Leda's face flushed and she made reply, with dignity:

"I will seek no collusion with such a woman as you. You are mistaken in me, for I will certainly tell to the police all that I know."

Words cannot describe Bella's fury.

"You will, will you?" she shrieked. "Then I'll shut your wind off, you white-faced little hussy. You shall die, and that will end it."

Leda was a child in the woman's grasp. The cruel fingers tightened about her fair neck, and she felt herself fainting when relief came.

Two dark forms darted out of the alley.

"Quick, Bella!" cried Jack Benson. "The officers are close upon us. Not a moment—Ah, what have you got there?"

A great cry escaped the villain's lips as he recognized Leda. Just at that moment Bella, inspired with the fear of capture, hurled her would-be victim from her. Benson started toward her to drag her along with him, but his sister cried:

"It won't do, Jack. Don't be a fool. Run for your life!"

Into the gloom they dashed, and Leda was left to recover with a powerful effort from her faint. Very quickly she regained herself, and murmured:

"Thank Heaven! If the officers would only come!"

But the alley remained as silent as before. Nobody appeared. The alarm given by Benson was a false one, though it had been the saving of Leda's life.

At that instant, just as she recovered from the effects of her struggle, Leda was rewarded with a startling sight. A great light suddenly blazed up in full view before her. It came from the lower story of the bank building, and wrung a cry from her:

"They have set the building on fire, and left a man bound and gagged inside to perish. He must be saved."

## CHAPTER XI.

### A BRAVE GIRL'S WORK.

Leda Lee was swayed by this one impulse, which her generous, sympathetic nature responded to in full. But how to act was the problem before her.

No time was to be lost. If any man, whether it be High Ladder Harry or someone else, was bound and gagged and left in the building to burn to death, the quickest possible action must be made.

Fire gets in its work generally very quickly, and it requires but an incredible space of time for it to spread through a building and prevent any possibility of its being saved.

"Oh, what shall I do?" moaned the distracted young girl as she wrung her hands piteously and looked about in vain for some person in sight. The flames meanwhile had begun to run like lightning through the big building, and smoke was pouring out of the windows in a vast cloud.

Leda acted upon a natural impulse, and began to cry wildly: "Fire! Fire!"

Her sweet voice rang out musically upon the night air, but it brought no response. She ran madly up the steps of a house near and pounded upon the door. But no answer came.

Almost the entire population of the little town was at the other fire. In a state of desperation Leda decided upon a daring move for a weak young girl like herself.

She plunged unhesitatingly into the darkness of the alley.

It was not difficult to find the back yard gate, which the incendiaries had left open.

The fire in the bank had illumined the rear yard so that she could identify the smallest object about. She saw the steps leading up to the rear door, which was open.

She sprang up these and began to ascend the stairs. Even then the smoke was stifling.

Guided by what seemed a kind fate, she reached the landing and attempted to open the door which led into the bank.

But it was securely fastened. In vain she pushed upon it. She cried out loudly:

"Harry, tell me, are you in there? Speak to me. I am Leda, come to save you. Oh, speak to me!"

Then she remembered that if he was gagged he could not answer her. A strange instinct told her that he was beyond that door. But how was she to open it? Her strength was not sufficient to force in the door.

"Oh, I must go to him," she cried wildly. "Oh, he must be saved. If I were only a strong man. What can I do, what can I do?"

"She wrung her hands and paced the narrow hall in distraction. Suddenly a thought occurred to her, a happy inspiration as it were.

In the yard below she had passed a coal shed. Perhaps in that place she might find an ax or some instrument with which she could batter down the door.

Down the stairs she flew like a bird. Hope gave her infinite strength.

Meanwhile, Harry Wilton had been suffering terrible agony of spirit. Bound and gagged he lay there upon the floor, unable to liberate himself, unable to act, and compelled to await a horrible impending death.

He saw the mad flames run up the wall and along the ceiling. Saw the desk and the furniture ignite and burn, and could even feel the heat of the flames as they played fancifully through the room.

He counted the minutes and seconds, and waited in vain for the alarm which he vainly hoped would be sounded. It did not come. Well he knew the reason why.



Unless succor came very shortly he realized that he would suffocate to death in the place. He regretted now his utter folly in allowing his foes to decoy him into the place.

Thus he lay upon the heated floor and wrestled with his bonds. Suddenly, in the very midst of his despair, he heard the voice of Leda Lee calling to him.

At first, in his distorted state of mind, it seemed to him like a voice from heaven. Then he vainly strived to answer.

"Oh, God!" he thought, bitterly. "I am certainly doomed. As I do not answer she will not believe that I am here. All is over."

This imbued him with desperation. All sorts of weird fancies flitted through his mind. The dancing forked flames he fancied demons, and the seething fire was the depths of Inferno!

He made a wild, mad effort to break his bonds. In the very midst of his despair came a ray of hope. They yielded.

Not but a little at first, but very soon he felt one of his wrists partly free. With bursting brain and strained nerves he succeeded in drawing one hand out of the tangle of rope and knots. Eureka! one hand was free.

He worked with the desperation born of despair. One knot was very stubborn, but he finally mastered it and had both hands free.

It was now an easy matter to free his feet. Then he sprang up and staggered toward the door.

He threw his weight against it, but it would not yield. It was a strong door, and not easily forced. The smoke was getting thicker and the flames were creeping nearer. But little time was left.

This was the only available exit. Failure to force the door almost drove Harry mad, but controlling his nerves as best he could, he began to look around for something with which to batter down the door.

But not a thing was to be found. The crowbars with which the villains had opened the safe they had taken very good care to remove.

"I am lost!" gasped the young fireman, as he felt the smoke overcoming him. "There is no help for me now."

But he had barely uttered the words when there came a sudden crash. It was a blow upon the door, such as he knew could only be made with an ax. A wild thrill pervaded his whole frame.

He now had use of his mouth, and shouted:

"Quick, for kind Heaven's sake! I will die here unless I get air very soon."

Another blow fell upon the panel of the door, and it crashed in. Then a voice which Harry recognized as Leda's cried:

"Thank Heaven! I was not mistaken. I knew that you were in there."

"Leda Lee!" cried the young fireman. "How marvelous this is."

"Heaven has given me a chance to acquit myself of the debt I owed you for saving my life," cried the young girl. "But I must first break open this door. Explanations afterwards."

"You are right, Leda, my brave girl," cried Harry. "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Well, pass me the ax through this broken panel. I am stronger than you, and can make quick work of it."

Leda did so, and Harry gave the door several well-directed blows, taking it from its hinges. He rushed through, and, throwing one arm about his fair rescuer's waist to help her, they started down the stairs. The smoke was thick about them, and they realized before the open air was reached that a very few moments more of this sort of thing would have terminated the existence of both.

Into the rear yard they staggered, and Harry listened only to a brief explanation from Leda.

Duty was paramount in his mind, and taking her hand in his, he said:

"You have saved my life, Leda. I will never forget it. But there are human lives in danger in this building. I have hard work before me, but I will see you after the fire is put out. Don't forget, I want to see you then."

With this he led her safely from the yard, and then started madly to give the alarm.

But it had already been given. The report had reached the chief at the tenement house, where the fire was under control. He had at once sent Hook and Ladder No. 2 and a hose carriage to the scene of the new conflagration.

These companies were coming up the street at full speed, followed by an intensely excited crowd of people.

Harry met them and took his position in the van of the Hook and Ladder Company. His brother firemen were amazed at sight of him, no doubt wondering where he came from, but there was no time for explanation. On to the burning building they kept at full speed.

But, brief as the time had been, the fire had gone clean up through the rear of the building, gutting that part of it to the roof. Here the fire was sweeping through the entire building, threatening it with destruction. To a person at all familiar with fires, it is a well-known fact that the flames will seek out the stairways in the quickest possible time, these acting as a sort of flue with a mighty draft.

Therefore those who are so unfortunate as to be in the upper stories are cut off from any escape in that direction in very quick time. This proved the case with the bank building fire. All stairways were cut off, leaving fully half a dozen people who lived in rooms in the top story in a most precarious position.

With no way of getting down in immediate safety from the mighty height, these unfortunate people could only throw open their windows and scream madly for help.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE BROKEN LADDER.

High Ladder Harry, whose presence the crowd had discovered and madly cheered, was the first to perceive the situation of those in the upper stories.

Instantly he set about devising a plan for their rescue.

By this time all the people who had been at the tenement house fire were present, and the other companies had arrived.

Several streams of water were upon the flames, and a hard fight was in progress.

But what absorbed everybody's attention was the presence of the agonized people in the upper story. They hung over the window ledges, calling wildly for help. One poor woman, losing her reason, leaped, and was dashed to death on the pavement below.

"High Ladder Harry!" shouted a voice in the crowd. "He can save them!"

The cry was taken up, and wild cheers arose. Harry scarcely noticed the demonstration, so busy was he constructing a ladder long enough to reach the roof of the doomed building.

For that the building was doomed there was no doubt. The water thrown upon the fire hardly seemed to check its mad course.

The ladders had been used at the tenement house fire, and Harry was obliged to rearrange them. One ladder, which he called "high ladder," or the topmost one, and upon which he



was accustomed to venture in the performance of his wonderful aerial feats, was a very slender structure, and he was glad to note that it had not been used.

This he adjusted to the very top of the other spliced ladders, and then he gave the word:

"Run her up, boys!"

Strong and willing hands seized the heavy section of ladders, and they went up gradually, but surely. The topmost ladder quivered like a reed at that height, but soon it rested against the roof.

It required certainly a man of the hardest nerve to mount that structure exposed to the shooting columns of flame and smoke. Every eye was upon High Ladder Harry as he threw aside his hat and ran nimbly up the rounds.

Up—up he went until he looked an infant almost at that giddy height. Now he was on the high ladder, which swayed and swung like a reed.

Every person held his breath. Would the young fireman succeed in his mission of mercy? Only God could tell. Up he went, and now had reached a window in which was an agonized mother and child.

Taking the child in his arms and assisting the mother onto the ladder, Harry started to descend. It was necessary for him to partly support the woman, so it was slow progress, but in due time the ground was reached.

Up went the young fireman again like an acrobat. Two men had climbed out and were descending. Harry passed them and reached the window again.

This time he had to assist an old lady to descend. He almost carried her by main strength upon his shoulders and brought her safely down.

But one more remained, and this was an invalid lady who must be carried down. Harry, however, threw an arm about her, and allowing her weight to fall upon his shoulders, started down again.

But this time the slender top ladder was seen to strangely sway and bend.

The weight of course was great, but Harry had firm faith in the ladder's powers of resistance. Yet he experienced a strange sensation which convulsed him with awful horror, and this sensation was imparted to him directly from the ladder. He felt it yield more than ever before, and in a manner which assured him that it was breaking.

Great God! the breaking of the ladder at that moment meant something horrible. Instant death must be the result of such a terrific fall.

The crowd below had seen and appreciated the same thing, and a great cry went up:

"The ladder is breaking!"

Then a hush like that of death ensued. Every man held his breath in awful suspense.

Fearing the breaking of the ladder, Harry had started swiftly to descend. But he was too late.

There was a sudden sharp snap, a crash, and the light top ladder parted almost in the middle. Down it went against the building, and reeling, pitched into the street below.

But the break had come below Harry Wilton's position instead of above, and only a seeming miracle saved him. With the fall of the detached under part of the ladder the upper part slid down and seemed about to be precipitated into the street with its weight of human life.

But it did not fall. Why this miracle?

By the rarest of good fortune the sharp hooks upon the end of the top ladder caught in the gutter of the building, and there the remnant of ladder hung in mid-air, swinging back and forth, High Ladder Harry clinging to the rounds with the invalid woman partly upon his shoulders. A more thrill-

ing situation and a more miraculous escape pen never depicted.

Of course the danger was not past. At any moment the remnant of ladder thus precariously suspended might fall. But it was a respite, and those below recovered from a stupor induced by horror to make a swift action.

A new ladder was quickly rigged. Meanwhile the young fireman clung bravely to his dangerous perch.

Even as he hung there Harry's mind was busy. He knew that it was from no ordinary cause that the ladder had broken, and he thought less of his own danger than he did of this fact.

"Queer!" he muttered under his breath. "As true as I live I believe this ladder has been tampered with."

A hundred different reflections were forced upon him. He recalled the mysterious visit of Benson to the engine house, and could not help but connect that with the breaking of the ladder.

Meanwhile the brave firemen below had in the quickest possible time rigged a new ladder and ran it up hastily. It was carried to a point which Harry could easily reach, and he swung himself upon it. He had scarcely done so when the gutter gave way, and the remnant of ladder fell to the street.

It did not take Harry long to reach the street, where he was overwhelmed. Everybody was delirious with joy over the fortunate escape of the young fireman.

Harry acknowledged their greetings modestly, and then hastened to make an examination of the broken ladder. This revealed a startling fact.

The ladder had been sawed two-thirds through its frame.

That it should have borne so much weight in the first place was simply wonderful. Harry felt like one stunned.

"That is the work of Jack Benson," he muttered. "He meant to kill me, but he has failed."

He did not impart his belief to anybody else. Of course the report of the broken ladder and that it had been sawed created a genuine sensation. All sorts of theories were circulated, and for a week the matter was the chief topic of conversation.

But all efforts at a solution of the mystery were unavailing. Nobody, somehow, seemed to connect Benson, the really guilty party, with the villainous act.

Harry did not venture to make any accusations. He imagined that this would result in nothing satisfactory, and he dismissed the whole thing from his mind in view of new and most thrilling events which every hour was developing.

A week had passed since the incendiary fire at the First National Bank. Detectives had in vain searched for the robbers, and the general excitement of the affair had in a measure died out when a new and startling contingency arose.

Harry Wilton had not forgotten the debt he owed Leda Lee, the street singer, for the saving of his life. But he had not seen her since the night of the big fire.

Finally, after ineffectually looking for her upon the street, he was determined to pay a visit to the lodging-house where, with her foster-father, she found residence. It was an early hour in the morning that he rapped upon the door of the house in question, a shabby, dilapidated affair in the poverty stricken quarter of the city.

The landlady, a slatternly woman, answered the rap and said:

"They may be up, sir, and they may not. It is the first room on the right. Go right up, sir."

Harry brushed past her and went on up the stairs. He rapped at the door, but no answer came. He rapped again, and this time the latch slipped and the door swung in a trifle, it being unlocked. But a little ways did it open, yet it was far enough for Harry to see a part of the interior of the room.



The sight which met his gaze gave him an awful thrill of horror, and he swung the door wide open. The room was in a state of disarrangement, the furniture overturned, and upon the carpet, with a glaring, bloody wound over his temple, lay Samuel Lee.

"My God!" gasped Harry. "Murder has been done!"

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### AT THE DESERTED HOUSE.

Benson and Bertrand had really fancied that they were pursued by officers when they fled from the alley so swiftly that night after setting the fire in the bank building.

Had it not been for this it is safe to say that Leda Lee might have been compelled to accompany them.

As it was, their sole and terrifying thought was that they were pursued, and escape was paramount. Leaving the spot hurriedly with Bella, Benson following, they struck out for the outskirts of the town.

Not until well without the city limits was a halt called, and this was in a dark lane just off the main highway.

Here Bertrand, out of breath, sank down upon the dew-besprinkled turf.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, pantingly, "I wouldn't run again like that for all the money in fifty such banks. I was a fool, anyway, to lend myself to this."

Benson, who carried the black bag containing the boodle, sank down beside him.

"What's that?" he cried sharply. "What do you mean by saying that you are a fool?"

A bitter curse escaped Bertrand's lips.

"Why, can't you see?" he said, almost savagely. "We haven't seen the last of this scrape yet. We haven't worked it right."

"It is a nice time to find that out," said Benson in disgust. "I suppose you mean it ain't certain that Harry Wilton won't be rescued from the fire?"

"Well, that's a chance. He may and he may not."

"Yes, more likely to, though."

"If he goes up in smoke we are all safe. Nobody else can bear witness against us, can they? What's the use of kicking?"

"Who's kicking?"

"You!"

"You are a liar!"

Benson gave a violent start, more of amazement than anger.

"Go easy, John," he said, coolly. "We don't want to have any row just now. But I don't like being called a liar."

"You don't, eh?"

"No."

"Well, I don't care any more for you than I do for a yaller dog!"

"Perhaps not," said Benson quietly. "You may some time, though."

"Come, come," said Bella, sharply, "you are making fools of yourselves. What reasons have you for the fear that young Wilton will not perish in the fire? Certainly no help can get to him easily. Everybody in town, as well as all the fire companies, are at the other fire. Before they can reach the bank Harry Wilton will have been suffocated."

Bertrand, who had seemed in a singularly depressed state of mind, felt his spirits revive.

"Maybe you are right, Bella," he declared. "But don't forget that we left that doll-faced street singer there to spread the alarm."

"Leda Lee!" exclaimed Benson.

"Yes."

"Confound the luck!" muttered the villain. "Why didn't I have time to drag her away with us. It was my grand opportunity."

"What would you want to do that for?" asked Bertrand, sharply.

"To tell you the truth," said Benson, "I am dead gone on that gal. I've sworn a solemn oath that she shall be mine, and I mean to have her."

"Humph! You're a softer fool than I thought you were, commented Bertrand.

"Egad, anybody would be a fool to win her," cried Benson. "You know that, John, as well as I do."

"No pretty face ever made a fool of me yet."

"All right. You and I don't agree on any point to-night."

"No, I reckon not," said Bertrand, savagely, as he sprang to his feet. "But this ain't business. Where is that carry-all?"

"Do ye want to go on to Raven's Rest now?" asked Benson, also rising.

"Yes, of course I do. We are only gambling away time here."

"All right."

Benson deposited the black bag upon the ground and hastened away into the gloom. Bella now sidled up to Bertrand, and said in an ecstatic whisper:

"We have a good little sum to begin life on now, John. We will be married very soon. Won't it be happiness?"

Bertrand restrained an impulse to push her from him, and said almost testily:

"What nonsense, Bella. How could we marry on twenty thousand. That is not all—one-third of that money must go to Jack."

"To Jack," exclaimed the woman in a strange voice. "Yes, perhaps so. It may be that Jack won't ever need his part. Nothing must bar our plans, John."

In spite of his hardihood the villain shuddered at this superlative show of heartlessness which was suggested in the woman's words. That she should meditate so fiendish a step as the taking of her brother's life for that paltry sum was even to Bertrand inexpressible horrible. It is needless to say that he was in no wise sincere with her. To marry her would be impossible. He feared her as a murderess, that was all. It was his inborn purpose to rid himself of her ere long.

"All right, Bella," he said impatiently, "we must wait for the future. Is Jack making that team? Ah, the fiends take him, here he is."

The thud of horses' hoofs resounded upon the turf, and a single horse and carryall came up. Benson held the reins and waited for his sister and colleague to spring in. Then he gave the horse free rein, and they dashed away and out upon the highway.

The horse was a high mettled animal, and carried them along very swiftly.

Bertrand sank back on the cushions and did not speak during the journey. On through the darkness Benson drove, over rough roads, and through dark patches of woods, until after an hour's hard drive he drew rein before a house which, even in the gloom, could be seen to be old and dilapidated and seemingly deserted.

But springing out of the carriage, Bertrand burst into this ancient dwelling and struck a light.

Upon a table in a hall otherwise bare and devoid of furniture was a lamp which the villain lit. Holding it before him he pushed through into another room, which contained chairs and a table.



Upon a hearth was heaped a pile of wood. Bertrand touched a match, and almost instantly a cheery fire was burning.

Bella Benson came in next, but Jack was taking care of the horse in the old barn near, and did not come in at once.

Bertrand cast the bag containing the booty upon the table, and then threw himself into a chair before the fire.

He did not speak to Bella, who had seated herself opposite.

"It seems to me," said the scheming woman, candidly, "that you are very cool toward me to-night."

At this moment Jack Benson came in, and Bertrand came out of his lethargy.

"Am I?" he exclaimed coldly. "Perhaps I am. In fact, I will admit that I was never more fully satisfied in my life that I have made a fool of myself."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Look at what I have done. Mind you, I am not squealing. I do not mean to back out, but to play this game through to the end. Yet you will admit that I have exchanged a fine home, the love of a good woman and a fat income, as well as my reputation, for the berth of a hunted criminal, a bank thief, and an outcast. You will not deny that I have been a fool."

Lightning flashed from Bella Benson's eyes. She never looked more dangerous in her life. Bertrand quailed before her.

"That is very strange talk from you, John Bertrand," she said. "You have led me to believe that all this you have done for love of me. What is this that you have forfeited to my love and assistance through life? You do not mean to say that you are repenting at leisure, John Bertrand? Let us have an understanding at once. I demand it."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE ABDUCTION.

The expression upon Bertrand's face was indescribable. He could not speak for some moments, but realized very plainly that he had taken a step too far.

While secretly he felt hatred for the woman Bella Benson, he knew that he could not succeed in his plans without her aid. He saw in that instant that any manifestation of dissatisfaction or remorse upon his part would expose his true state of mind to her.

It would be neither wise nor politic to at present show his hand. It was in keeping with shrewdness and good sense to for a while longer maintain the deception.

So he sat quite still and speechless, gazing at the indignant woman. Jack Benson was watching them with an odd smile upon his evil face.

Finally Bertrand's features relaxed and his manner changed.

"Why don't you speak, John Bertrand?"

"Tut, tut, my dear," said the wily scoundrel in a light voice. "You must not so seriously regard my hypochondria. Indeed, you will admit yourself that the way things have been going is enough to try the patience of a saint."

"That does not excuse your attack upon me. You should not heap reproach upon one who is making as great sacrifices as you are yourself."

"No, no; you misunderstand me, Bella, dear," affirmed the hypocrite. "Really you must not heed my expressions. I am not dissatisfied with you, but angry with the wayward fate which so interferes with the success of our plans."

"Do you mean that?"

She spoke sternly, and gave him a searching glance. Bertrand, in his most oily manner, replied:

"Of course I do, my dear. Let us drop the subject. You have misunderstood me. Come, we cannot afford to quarrel. I still think, and will always think, you the peer of all the women I ever met."

This bit of flattery, strange as it may seem, melted the heart of this shrewd, ordinarily practical woman. The truth was she was deeply in love with the man, and love is ever blind to all faults.

She threw off her wrap, and with a lighter expression of countenance, drew a chair up to the table.

"As you say, my dear," she said, lightly. "We will drop the subject. Come, Jack, we have business to do. Now for a fair division. Draw up here."

Benson's eyes gleamed avariciously and he drew a chair up to the table also. Bella drew the black bag to her and opened it, pouring out upon the table the coin and bills.

"We might as well have had a hundred thousand," she said. "If you could only have broken into that inner safe. But then it is a fair night's work. Now I have a proposition to make."

The two men looked at her inquiringly.

"Supposing we divide this money now," she said. "We shall all be flush. We have much important work to do, and it is imperative that we give our first attention to it. But with all this money some one of us might be tempted to go on a spree. I propose that we wait until after the game is fully won, then we can divide fifty times as much."

"Good enough," exclaimed Bertrand.

Bella gazed hard at her brother. The latter's eyes glistened.

"But what is to be done with the money?" he asked, craftily.

"I will keep it."

"You?"

"Yes. Why not? You surely are not afraid to trust your own sister, are you?"

"But why not divvy now? What is the work we must do next?"

"I will tell you," said Bella smoothly. "You understand, of course, that John is at present married to a woman he does not love. She had money, but he has spent it for her. Now, Harry Wilton, her son, is heir to a large fortune. There is a way that John can get the money. In the first place, young Wilton dies a natural death, by sickness or accident, see?"

"The money goes to his heirs."

"His mother and himself are the sole living members of the family. There are no other relatives. The money would go to her."

"I see."

"Now, John must get control of that wealth. If he cannot induce his wife to put it into his hands, why—then she must follow her dutiful son—see?"

Benson whistled long and deep.

"That is a deep and dangerous game," he said. "But I like it. You want me to stand in with you, eh?"

"Yes."

"Yes; but what will be done with this money when John gets it?"

"We will go abroad to a more congenial clime and live in a princely fashion. The division will be equal."

"I am with you," declared Benson, "upon one consideration."

"What is it?"

"That you will help me out with my little love affair. I want Leda Lee for my own. You can help me."

"Don't be a fool, Jack. The world is full of lovely women whom wealth will win."



"My heart is set upon it."

"Then you mean business."

"Yes."

"Very well," said the shrewd woman, in a manner which showed that she weighed every word. "If you will enlist with us and put those people out of the way—in fact, do the dirty work—we will help you to cage the pretty bird. I don't envy you, though. She will give you plenty of trouble."

"I will tame her!" said Benson, savagely. "Depend upon that. Then the bargain is made?"

"Yes."

"But what about this twenty thousand?"

"I will keep it until the job is done. Then we will divide the whole boodle."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Shake hands."

This was done, and Benson then left the room to seek slumber in another chamber. Bella Benson's eyes gleamed like stars as she turned to Bertrand, after he had gone.

"The game is ours," she said.

"I hardly know," demurred the villain. "We have placed ourselves in Jack's power in one way."

"You are mistaken. We have him in our power. When the right time comes and he has done the work for us and is in our way—well, leave the rest to me."

In spite of himself Bertrand shuddered at the horrible significance of the woman's words. She seemed to him at that moment a veritable ogress, and he could hardly overcome his repugnance. But he muttered to himself:

"Ah, my precious bloodthirsty dame. Go on with your nefarious game, gain the money, do all the work for me, and when the time comes that you are in my way—well, it will be easy for me to rid myself of you forever."

Indeed, these people were, in the finest sense of the term, cutthroats—all. Such cold-blooded villainy could scarcely find a peer in any part of the criminal world.

The Raven's Rest proved a secure retreat for the incendiaries, and while the detectives were pursuing a score of futile trails, they rested unmolested in the old deserted mansion. Thus a week passed, until one day Benson announced that he had his plans laid for the abduction of Leda Lee.

In close disguise, one dark night, they accordingly stole into the town, and Benson, by means of a skeleton key, effected an entrance to the house in which Leda Lee and her foster-father dwelt.

It happened that they had not retired early, and while the old man was sleeping in a chair by the little hearth fire, Leda was seated with her back to the chamber door engaged in deep reverie, when suddenly she heard muffled footsteps behind her, and before she could turn a heavy muffler was placed over her face, and strong arms held her in a vise-like grip.

Samuel Lee awoke at that moment, and sprang up, but before even an outcry could be made Benson felled him to the floor with a wound over the temple. Leda was unable to even struggle, so quickly and securely was she bound and gagged and carried out of the doors into a close carriage.

Not one of the other inmates of the house had been aroused by this most daring feat of abduction.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A WONDERFUL RECOVERY.

Success of the most sanguine sort had attended the abductors in their vile scheme.

Not until the next morning when, as we have seen, Harry Wilton called at the chamber door, was the discovery of the awful crime made.

Upon seeing the old man lying there with a frightful wound upon his head, Harry's first belief was that he had been foully murdered.

An awful cry of horror pealed from his lips which brought others to the spot.

But a quick examination, which Harry had presence of mind enough to make, satisfied him with a thrill of joy that the old man's heart yet beat and that he was not dead.

"Bring me water!" he cried. "He must be saved."

The request was quickly complied with, and Harry soon had brought the old man out of his faint. The blood was washed from his face and he was assisted to the bed where he lay for some time in a sort of semi-stupor.

A medical man was summoned, and he gave his attention to the matter of restoring the injured man's faculties. While he was doing this Harry proceeded to make an examination of the room and ascertain if possible an explanation of the mystery.

Not a trace of Leda could be found anywhere, and Harry hit upon the actual truth that she had been abducted. By whom he could only guess, and that aright also.

"It is the villainous work of Jack Benson," he declared. "I feel sure of that. By the justice, he shall pay for this outrage!"

The landlady's statement that the front door of the house had been found open that morning confirmed Harry's belief in the method of perpetrating the crime.

"They made an entrance by the front door," he declared positively. "Then stealing silently upstairs, they took Leda unawares, and reduced the old man to insensibility by that blow on the head. It was a devilish and a daring scheme."

By this time Samuel Lee had recovered himself sufficiently to talk. A most marvelous change had come over him.

With both hands pressed to his head he sprang up out of bed before anybody could restrain him, and cried out like one with a sudden divine inspiration:

"Where am I? Where have I been all these years? Oh, God be praised! I have got it all back again! I am myself once more. I can remember all—the black treachery—the gold! Ha, ha, ha! this is joy!"

Everybody in the room save one man, and that was the doctor, thought he had gone raving mad. The man of medicine took him by the arm and said gently but firmly:

"Sir, you must know your condition now. God has given you back that which has been so long lost to you. It is a physical change not uncommon to one with your malady. Therefore, knowing that I am not talking to an insane man, or one who has been so long an imbecile, I need not use stronger terms to impress upon you the necessity of keeping perfectly quiet for a few days."

The old man pressed one hand across his brow, then suffering them to lead him to the bed, said:

"Doctor, you are right. It is to God that I owe thanks."

For several days Harry Wilton hovered over the bedside of the sick man and nursed him, until a merciful Providence, aided by a strong constitution, enabled Samuel Lee to arise from his bed a well man, mentally and physically.

During all this time he had seemed at times busy recalling affairs of the past, but of all that passed through his mind he mentioned not one word.

Only once did he seem affected, and then upon an impulse he turned upon his pillow and asked:

"What is the name of this city?"

"The name is Freeport," replied Harry.

"Ah! What is your name?"

"Harry Wilton."



The old man's form trembled for a moment, and his hands clutched the bedclothes, while he gazed in a strange, yearning manner into Harry's face in a way which the young fireman could not understand.

After that he was reserved, quiet and taciturn. Harry and the old man were, however, strangely drawn toward each other.

The result was that Samuel Lee and Harry Wilton went forth together to search for the missing young girl.

A week had elapsed since the abduction, a lapse of time which to Harry in his anxiety and suspense had seemed a year.

In the meantime the young fireman had got possession of a clue. A certain man in Freeport who pursued the vocation of a hunter and with whom Harry was well acquainted imparted to him the information that while out on the track of a fox he had come upon what he had always supposed to be an old deserted house, but that he had seen a man whom he was sure was John Bertrand coming out of the front door.

He was unable to guide them to the place, having to go up the river that afternoon, so he proceeded to describe the location of the retreat of the bank robbers.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE SEARCH FOR THE DESERTED HOUSE.

"Ye see, my boy," continued Parke, the fox hunter, "to reach that old deserted house ye must take a trail over the Black Ridge. When you've got over the ridge go to the northwest and set an old dead pine on Scraggy Mountain directly in front of you. Keep straight on until you reach the valley below and come out in a big field. Just beyond you'll find a road. Go on up that road to the west and turn to your first right hand road. Two miles farther on you'll find the house."

"Whew!" exclaimed the young fireman as he wrote all this down. "If we can find that place we'll be lucky. Can't you possibly go with us, Parke?"

"No, I can't possibly," replied the hunter. "But if you'll follow them directions ye'll find the place, and I'm sure the whole gang is hiding there."

"Very well," rejoined Harry. "I will do as you say, Parke. Now, Mr. Lee, we will be off. We must have horses, and I must take officers with me."

Horses were procured at a stable near, and the start was made.

They galloped out of Freeport, and soon had come in sight of the long mountain wall known as the Black Ridge.

A mountain trail was struck, and Harry set his course as directed by the hunter.

They rode along at a leisurely pace through the thick forest. Harry and Samuel Lee were in advance, and kept up a conversation upon a subject which seemed to interest Mr. Lee very much.

"Then you have always been a resident of Freeport?" he asked Harry.

"Yes, I was born in the town," replied the young fireman. "But I have not always lived at home. My father died when I was quite young."

"Ah! Do you remember the circumstances of your father's death?"

"Quite well, sir."

"What were they?"

"My father went West to locate and start a gold mine. It was there in the wilds that he lost his life. It was a great blow to my mother."

A strange expression came into Mr. Lee's face which puzzled

Harry. He bowed his head low upon his breast, and asked in a low tone:

"Even your mother grieved for the loss of your father, did she?"

"Indeed, she has never recovered from it."

"But she has loved since?"

"No, she has not done that."

"But she married again."

"Ah," said Harry, sadly. "That was the greatest sorrow of her life. My father's bosom friend and his companion in his last hours came home with the report of his death. He was very kind to mother and worked upon her sympathies until she committed the mistake of promising to marry him. It was not until ten long years had sufficed to partly assuage her first sorrow that she did this."

"Then your mother was not happy in her second marriage?" asked Samuel Lee.

"She could not be," replied Harry. "She was basely deceived by a villain. None of John Bertrand's promises were fulfilled——"

Harry came to a dead stop. Samuel Lee had given a sudden convulsive gasp, and, deadly pale, seemed about to reel out of the saddle, and Harry in alarm urged his horse nearer and supported him. But he recovered quickly.

"It was a slight ill turn," he said apologetically. "I have not yet regained my strength."

"So your mother married John Bertrand, eh?" he continued.

"Yes," replied Harry; then suddenly flashing a glance into Samuel Lee's face asked: "Then you know John Bertrand, do you?"

Mr. Lee's face assumed an indescribable expression.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I know who John Bertrand is. I owe you an explanation of my interest in this matter, which you will understand when I say that I knew your father in life very well, and he was a valued friend of mine."

"What!" cried Harry eagerly and with undisguised pleasure. "You knew my father? Indeed, I am glad to know that. We shall be all the better friends now."

"Harry, you may rest assured of my friendship while life lasts," declared Mr. Lee with depth of feeling. "You have rendered me such favors as I shall be slow to forget. Here is my hand."

The old man's voice trembled as he took Harry's hand in his across the saddle pommels and gave it a firm grip. From that moment Harry Wilton felt that he would die for Samuel Lee, whom he adjudged one of the noblest of men.

They crossed the Black Ridge and now began to descend into the wooded valley below.

Harry recalled Parke's directions, and found the old pine tree from which he set his course.

Some hours later they came into a field, and crossing it, emerged into a road.

"Hurrah!" cried the young fireman. "We are on the right road now. Let us go on faster."

The two officers gladly complied with this suggestion, and urged their horses into a swift gallop.

Thus they rode on for some ways, taking the right hand road as directed by Parke. But presently they came to a junction with three other roads. Here was a puzzler. Parke had not mentioned this fact. Undoubtedly he had forgotten to do so.

"Which road ought we to take?" was Harry's query, echoed by the others.

It was impossible to guess the right one. Finally, after much discussion, they decided to take the one to the right and go on for two miles. If then they failed to find the deserted house they might return and try another of the roads.

"That is our only course," declared Harry, positively. "Let us go on."



He picked up the reins from his horse's neck and was about to urge him forward when a sudden sharp cry escaped one of the officers.

"Listen!" he said.

From the distance down the road came the regular sound of horses' hoofs. Every moment the sound drew nearer.

"Somebody is coming."

"Let us wait and see who it is," said the young fireman, with a curious premonition uppermost in his mind. "At least it may be someone who can inform us aright."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MADE A PRISONER.

Every moment the strange horseman drew nearer and finally swung into sight around a bend in the road. A great cry escaped Harry Wilton's lips.

It was not a man riding at that pace through the woods, but a woman. It needed only one glance to satisfy all as to her identity.

It was Bella Benson.

Almost at the same instant she caught sight of her foes.

Before she had time to recover from her surprise Harry Wilton had sprang forward and grasped her bridle rein and pulled her horse down upon its haunches. A mad cry escaped the woman's lips and a pistol gleamed in her hand.

But just in time Harry saw it, and with a quick move dashed it from her grasp.

"You are caught, Bella Benson," cried Harry, triumphantly. "Your rig is well nigh at an end. We have a warrant for your arrest. Where is your rascally brother, and where have you taken Leda Lee?"

"What do I know about the hussy?" snapped Bella. "I haven't seen her for a week, and don't know where she is."

No amount of argument or threatening would get more than this from the obdurate female schemer. It was only a waste of time, so she was given in charge of the officers, and it was decided to renew the search for the deserted house, which they felt sure could not have been far away.

They had already come two miles on the road, but the house was not in sight. A halt was called and a consultation held. All were much disappointed. In vain was an attempt made to get the truth from Bella.

She would not speak, but maintained a sullen silence except in one instance, when she snapped angrily:

"You shall pay for this insult. You have not the least right to arrest me, and you shall suffer for it. The law will favor me as well as you."

"If you are innocent it will," agreed Harry, coolly. "But your character is too well known, Bella. You and your rascal brother will get your just deserts very soon."

There was no other way but to return to Freeport, as night was coming on. It was in the edge of the evening when they dismounted before the stone jail.

Bella was taken down from her horse and confined in one of the cells. In less than an hour afterwards all Freeport knew of the arrest, and the most intense excitement was created.

The jail was surrounded by excited people. The chief of police interviewed the female prisoner, and tried in vain to wring a confession from her.

At least one of the incendiaries had been captured. The most important ones were yet at large, but it was believed that they would soon be captured.

Leaving the jail, Harry returned to the spot where he had left Samuel Lee. To his surprise the old man was not

there. He had taken his departure, as the young fireman thought, a little unceremoniously.

Nor was he to be found at the hotel nor about the town anywhere.

Not a little mystified, Harry went around to the engine house of No. 2.

Tim Keene, bluff and good-natured, stood in the gaslight by the door with arms akimbo.

"Ah, there, Harry Wilton!" he cried, in his jolly way. "Glad to see ye back. Did ye have any luck?"

Harry told him about their trip and adventures, and suddenly exclaimed, with inspiration:

"Why, upon my word Harry, I've been there. I know just where that old house is."

A wild cry escaped Harry's lips.

"You do?" he cried eagerly.

"You bet I do."

"Will you go there with me?"

"Of course I will, and this very minute, too. I'll get Dick Brady for a substitute, and we'll find that house—oh, by jingo!"

Jim Keene and Harry both were brought to their feet by a startling, inspiring sound. It set their veins tingling all in an instant.

Clang—clang—clang!

"Fire—fire!" the cry rang out upon the night air with thrilling force.

It was the only time in the young fireman's life that he had really felt like disobeying the duty call. But it was only for a moment that he had this feeling.

Then his duty paramount, all in all arose before him. Quick as a flash he sprang to the engine-house door.

Men were coming down the street at a rapid pace, and in a few moments more than a score of them were at the rope.

Out upon the street they rushed for the scene of action. The fire was reported to be in the suburbs.

A great wave of surprise and horror burst upon Harry suddenly as they came in sight of the fire. It seemed as if he must fall in a faint, for it was the home of his own mother, his own home which was in flames.

"Great God!" he gasped. "What could have done that?"

A horrible premonition of the truth, a dread conviction of disaster and death overwhelmed him. But with a mighty effort he threw off the feeling, and leaving the rope, he dashed ahead. He reached the house and pushed through the hall. Just beyond were glass doors opening out into a rear garden.

At this instant he saw a dark form glide through these. Almost instinct taught him that this was the incendiary. With a swift impulse he sprang in pursuit and caught him just as he reached the garden gate.

Then followed a struggle which baffles description. Harry finally had his man nearly down when an accident befell him. In the lawn there chanced to be a stake hole, and into this the young fireman inadvertently stepped. He lost his balance and fell backward, and in a moment was pinned down by his foe. He expected every moment to feel a knife thrust, but instead a voice hissed in his ear:

"Ah, it is you, is it, Harry Wilton? Fortune is playing into my hands."

A smothered cry escaped the young fireman as he suddenly recognized the voice, and he exclaimed:

"John Bertrand, may God help you now. Did you coiled fire to the house?"

Bertrand, for he it was, affected a strange hms about h. "Revenge is sweet," he hissed. "You can real ating sens arry

Wilton, that my time has come. I am the w escape fr d.

The villain with a chuckle drew from his pocket. With this he proceeded to tie his victim's hand



a few minutes Harry was helpless and unable to move even a finger.

Then Bertrand drew himself up and glowered upon his prisoner in perfectly devilish fashion. His voice had a fiendish accent as he said, slowly, and with measured tones:

"Now for my revenge. Now to wring drops of blood from your heart. You are bound, helpless, unable to move. You may not remain so for long, but it will be long enough. Now I will tell you my purpose in setting this house on fire."

"Ah, you admit it," said Harry, coolly.

"Yes, I admit it. I did set the house afire. The servants were away. It was my opportunity. I crept in and held an argument with your mother. She was defiant and maddened me. I determined to have revenge. I seized her, and in spite of her struggles I tied her to the wall in an upper room. That room is now full of flame and smoke, and there your dear mamma is at this moment no doubt succumbing to grim death in the embrace of the fire fiend. Eh? What's this? Take it pretty bad, do ye?"

The words of the villain were a revelation to Harry Wilton which nigh drove him mad. That his mother should be at that moment tied hand and foot and suffering death in its most agonizing form in the burning house, coming upon him in such a sudden fashion, nigh crazed him for the time being. He made a superhuman effort to free the bonds which prevented his going to her rescue.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A DARING RESCUE.

Words cannot portray the awful horror, dismay, and agony which Harry Wilton experienced. In vain he tried to break the cord which bound him, while Bertrand bent over him chuckling with the fiendish delight of a maniac.

"Monster!" cried Harry, with all the force he could summon, "set me free. I must save her. Oh, mother, mother. God have pity."

It was the spontaneous outburst of a breaking heart. So great was the boy fireman's love for her who had been his best and dearest friend in life that he was frantic in his efforts to fly to her rescue.

"Struggle as you please," hissed John Bertrand with a diabolical laugh. "You cannot help yourself. Ah, see the flames mount higher. Hear them roar and crackle. Revenge is mine—revenge is sweet."

The flames were gaining tremendous headway and roaring like a volcano, showing that the fine mansion was doomed to destruction. And Harry Wilton's own mother, bound and helpless, was in that building, awaiting a horrible death.

When the last ember should die out, and nothing be left of the fine house but a heap of ashes, who could say that the charred remains possibly to be found were hers? It was an awful thing to contemplate.

Now a reaction set in, and Harry felt a horrible faintness come over him. It seemed as if he must suffocate. A delirium induced by despair was upon him.

He saw in delirious fancy his mother's body in the flames—saw her consumed before his eyes, and he unable to help her.

Matt had reached this stage, and to Harry it seemed as if all well, all was settling down over his young life, when there at were sudden sound of excited voices and the tramp of father's

here in the were coming around the house, and with an ex to my mother John Bertrand sprang to his feet.

A strange expression my revenge, Harry Wilton," he said, in a grating

voice. "I don't want your life. I want you to live and suffer."

"To live and avenge my mother!" cried Harry, with sudden force. But Bertrand had glided away into the bushes. At the same moment a dark form was hurrying by the young fireman. With a great effort he cried out:

"Help, help! Oh, give me help!"

Jim Keene, who had been not a little mystified by Harry's strange disappearance, gave a great cry and came to a halt. He had just barely distinguished the prostrate figure at his feet.

"What's this?" he cried, in his bluff way. "Upon my word if it ain't Harry! Boy alive! what are you doing here?"

"I'm tied hand and foot, Jim," cried the young fireman.

In a twinkling big Jim out with his knife and cut the cords which bound the young fireman. Harry sprang to his feet. He did not even pause to thank Keene, but muttering incoherently, cried:

"My mother—she is in that house! I must save her!"

With the one impulse predominant in his bosom he started blindly for the burning house. Before anybody could do aught to restrain him he had plunged into the thickest of the smoke and was lost to view.

Harry staggered recklessly through the hall and gained the stairs. Flames were wreathing about the banisters, and an awful wall of smoke was above. It did not seem as if human being could go through it.

Yet the young fireman did not hesitate, but drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, held it firmly over his nostrils and dashed madly up the stairs.

He knew the awful risk he was incurring, knew that his mother must be beyond that wall of deadly smoke, and this was enough to cause him to dare anything. For aught he knew she might be dead, but he clung to hope.

Up the stairs he went. It seemed for a time as if the smoke must drive him back, but he forced his way upward. Reaching the first landing, he turned to the right.

It was fortunate that Harry knew the house thoroughly, else he could not have accomplished what he did.

He believed that it was in his mother's own chamber that Bertrand had bound and left his victim, and toward this he went. He was stifling for want of pure air. His strength was well spent, and it seemed for a moment as if he must indeed, give up.

But he kept on, though he was forced once to get down upon the floor, where there was a strong draught, and renew his breath. This enabled him to keep up, and, reaching the door of his mother's chamber, he found that it was open.

A fearful volume of smoke was pouring out of it, and, this lifting for an instant, in the bright light of the flames Harry saw an awful sight. Standing in one corner of the room, with hands and feet tied together, was Mrs. Bertrand, white-faced and agonized. The flames were eating up the lace and counterpane of the bed, and were creeping along the floor toward her.

She had escaped suffocation by being near an open transom, through which came a most powerful draught. Harry saw all this, and with a mighty cry of great joy sprang toward her.

"Mother!" he cried wildly. "Thank God, you shall be saved!"

The next moment he had her form in his arms. It was but an instant's work to cut the cords which bound her, and then she sank into his arms with a joyful cry:

"My Harry! God is merciful!"

She relapsed into a faint. Harry supported her unconscious form, but never for a moment lost command of himself. He knew that an instant's delay might be fatal.



With his mother's form clasped in his arms, he looked about him. His position was a most desperate one.

Fire and smoke were all about, and the walls of the house were trembling; the flames were beyond control.

Whichever way he might go Harry knew that he must meet fire. To go back down the stairs was a physical impossibility. The windows were wreathed in flame. At the last moment Harry chanced to think of a private stairway which led to the garret.

This was not yet in the grip of the fire king. It was the only chance of retreat, and he accepted it.

He kicked the door open and dashed up the narrow stairs. The smoke followed him in a blinding cloud.

Now he was in the garret where the fire had not yet penetrated. Smoke was there, though, but not in such quantity but that he was enabled to get a clear breath of air.

This revived him. He remembered a skylight which emerged upon the roof, and to this he went.

Bursting through it he climbed to the ridge-pole, where he supported himself and shouted to those below. Strange to say, he was not seen nor was his voice heard. The roar of the flames drowned the sound, and a dark pall of smoke obscured their vision.

His position was a critical one. Every moment it was growing more desperate, and he realized the need of quick action.

Accordingly he decided upon a daring move. He began to make his way down the sloping roof.

It was necessary to proceed with the utmost caution, but he succeeded in reaching the eaves and was revealed in a glare of light. A great cry went up from the crowd below.

"High Ladder Harry!" was the cry. "Save him! Up with a ladder!"

Many hands made light work, and a ladder was raised in a jiffy. It rested against the eaves, and Harry slid down upon it. A brother fireman came up to assist him with his burden, and he made his way safely to the ground.

The crowd received him with wild cheers. Once more he was a hero, and when the full particulars of the affair were known a great cry went up:

"Hang the villain! Call out the Vigilants! Hang John Bertrand!"

All Freeport was now thoroughly aroused. The last straw had broken the camel's back, and the wave of popular opinion against John Bertrand was overwhelming.

A hundred men were ready to band themselves together to hunt down the incendiaries and thieves. All they needed was a leader, and such was soon forthcoming.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### IN THE TOILS.

The position of Leda Lee was not an enviable one for a young girl of her stamp. In the power of unscrupulous villains, she hardly dared think of the fate which might become hers at any moment.

Jack Benson had been absent from the deserted house for several days, and now when he returned Leda learned a startling fact. This was that Bella Benson had been arrested and was in prison.

The crisis came one day when the woman who had been employed as the keeper of the fair young captive left the house and her charge very unceremoniously after an altercation with Benson.

Leda, in her chamber, heard the loud words below and shuddered, as a strange fear crossed her mind.

This fear found more tangible shape when she heard heavy footsteps suddenly outside her door.

The door swung open, and Jack Benson with a fiendish glare in his eyes stalked into the room.

It needed not a word to apprise Leda of the fact that the crisis of her young life was at hand. To her credit be it said that she met it bravely.

She started up as Benson entered so unceremoniously, and a faint red flush crept up over her fair face. With dignity she faced her hated oppressor.

Benson's expression changed to that of sensual admiration, and he sank into a chair, saying in a subdued voice:

"Excuse me, Leda, but you are divine to-day. I never saw you look so beautiful. Indeed, you are a prize well worth gambling for."

Leda's face flushed crimson. She did not make reply. This nettled the villain.

"Still uppish," he gritted savagely. "I'll take that out of you in time. Do you realize your position, my girl? You are wholly in my power. It would be better for you to treat me with a little consideration."

Leda turned upon him a gaze at once so cold and forbidding that he was somewhat taken aback.

"Yes, Jack Benson, I realize my position quite well. I know that I am in the power of a brute, for no one boasting of manhood would treat me in this barbarous fashion."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the villain, stung by her words. "That is a sharp tongue you have in your head, is it not? Upon my soul, I believe you will not be so easy to tame after all."

"Your victory will not be an easy one," said Leda, steadily.

"Then you have not modified your feelings toward me in the least."

"No, sir."

"Do you ever intend to?"

"Never!"

Benson gave a deep whistle.

"What if I try persuasion?"

"You can kill me first. I am not afraid to die."

"Come now, Leda, let us talk reason. I am not such a bad sort of a fellow when you come to know me."

"You are a brute!"

"Go easy. Why am I a brute?"

"Because if you were a man you would not keep me here."

"What shall I do with you?"

"Let me go."

"Ah, but then I should lose you. I am madly in love with you, Leda, and you must become mine. I would go mad to know that you were another's."

"But don't you see that I don't love you, and will never marry you?"

"That is what you think now. But if you were married to me you would love me better."

The young girl shivered.

"All this is idle talk," she said. "I told you, Jack Benson, that I would never consent to your proposals. This is quite enough. Further discussion is needless."

Benson arose to his feet.

"And I beg leave to remind you," he said, in a sinister way, "that your case is an utterly hopeless one. You are mine by the right of possession. I will tame you, as sure as my name is Jack Benson!"

He sprang forward and grasped her arm. With a shrill scream Leda wrested herself from him and recoiled to the farther end of the room.

But he followed her quickly, and threw his arms about her. She was a child in his strong grasp. A suffocating sense of horror nigh overpowered her, and she tried to escape from her hated captor.



Scream after scream pealed from her lips, until Benson placed his heavy hand across her lips.

He held her motionless and helpless in his grasp. With a fiendish chuckle he attempted to kiss her, crying:

"You shall be mine; if not willingly, by force! You do not know me yet."

Fortune favored Leda at that moment. The villain's foot slipped upon the floor and he partly fell. His hold was relaxed, and she writhed from his clutches.

A wild, desperate feeling had come over her. She was prepared to accept any chances, and darted to the door.

With a savage yell Benson sprang after her. But he was not so quick as she was.

She fled out of the house like a spirit. Down toward the road she ran and her foe close behind.

Of course Benson could outstrip her in such a race, and he gained upon her rapidly.

Leda felt her strength failing, and just at a bend in the road Benson clutched her shoulder.

She was brought to a halt, and a wild cry of horror and despair escaped her lips. In vain she tried to throw off that grip. It was one of iron.

"Help! help!" was the wild agonized cry which pealed from her lips, and it rang shrilly out upon the air. But what availed it? Who was near to help her? It seemed as if she might have shied forever before help should come.

But her cries were so piercing and sharp that they maddened Benson.

"Curse you, shut up your mouth," he yelled savagely. "You are enough to drive a man mad. Shut up, I say."

His clutch upon her delicate shoulder was so strong as to wring a cry of pain from her.

He drew her to him and wound both his arms about her. It was like a dove struggling with a fierce serpent. She feebly resisted his villainous attack.

"Oh, Father in Heaven!" she gasped, "will no one come to my help? Must I submit to this fate? Help me, oh, help me!"

It was a wailing, piteous cry, such as would have moved a heart of stone, and this time fortunately it did not fall upon empty air.

Suddenly a tall form emerged from shrubbery near, and a commanding voice cried:

"Scoundrel, I have found you at last! Take your hands from that child, or it will cost you your miserable life!"

Benson, in the deepest of amazement, wheeled, to find himself in the presence of a resolute man, who covered him with a shining revolver. Nothing could have astonished him more, and he relaxed his grip upon Leda and recoiled with an ugly imprecation.

Leda, thus released, sprang to the side of her champion, whom she saw with inexpressible joy was no other than her kind friend and guardian, Samuel Lee.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A TERRIBLE STRUGGLE.

Words cannot express the surprise, chagrin, and anger of the villain Benson at this unlooked-for interference.

He had dreamed that he was quite alone in the place, and the presence of another was not thought of. Particularly the appearance of Samuel Lee in such sudden fashion and at such a moment maddened him.

"You—you here!" he cried, with flecks of foam gathering about his lips. "What has brought you here?"

"I can truly say that it was the hand of Providence which

guided me to this spot," declared Samuel Lee, with white, stern face. "The punishment of the evil-doer is certain, and yours is at hand, Jack Benson."

"What, preaching, eh?" sneered the brute. "So ye think Providence sent ye here, eh? Ye may think it was the hardest kind of luck afore ye get through."

"I think not," said the old man, quietly, as he gathered Leda into his protecting arms. "God bless you, my dear child. You have had sore trials."

"Oh, father," sobbed the young girl joyfully, "you cannot know how glad I am to see you. But we must not stay here. We must go away at once. If the other man should come back they might do you harm."

"You mean John Bertrand," said Samuel Lee with a queer steel-like glitter in his eyes and a peculiar ring in his voice. "Do not fear. I am very anxious to see John Bertrand. I have a score to settle with him."

"And I have a score to settle with you, dotard," declared Benson, savagely. "Put up that revolver."

"When I do it will be when you have left this spot."

"You won't put it up, eh?"

"No."

"Would you shoot me?"

"Like a dog, if you dare to come a step nearer."

Benson cringed, for he was not blind to the fact that he had gone far enough. He turned a shade paler, yet continued in an insinuating manner:

"It appears to me, sir, that you have very suddenly regained full possession of your intellect in a very surprising manner. Perhaps that was a noble subterfuge of yours to cover up your real character under a beggar's cloak."

Mr. Lee trembled visibly, and his face turned a shade paler. He saw Leda's upturned face, and her expression of solicitude, and then drew himself up proudly, saying:

"Perhaps I can here fitly vouchsafe an explanation. For a number of years I have been troubled with a clouded memory, which in a great measure affected my mental health. But a sudden blow on the head has restored to me my faculties. I am now fully able to speak and act for myself. I can recall that past which has been for so many years lost to me."

Leda gave a wild cry of joy, and flung both arms about Mr. Lee's neck.

"Oh, father! father!" she cried, "that is joyful news. Oh, God has done it! He is ever kind to us. I am so glad!"

It was a fatal move upon her part, for in the act of throwing her arms about his neck, she had caused Mr. Lee to lower the pistol which held their most dreaded foe at bay.

Benson was quick to see the opportunity and seize it. With a lightning-like movement he sprang forward, and like a panther was upon the old man.

The pistol was dashed from his grasp and fell far away.

Leda was hurled aside, and too late saw the consequences of her move. A wild scream of horror and despair pealed from her lips.

Mr. Lee was no match for a powerful fellow like Jack Benson.

The attack had been made so quickly that he had barely time to get into position suitable for defense.

The villain bore him backward like a reed, but he made a desperate effort and recovered himself.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the brute. "The tables have turned. Victory is mine. You see I am not to be vanquished."

"The end is not yet," muttered Mr. Lee, as he threw his whole strength into the struggle.

But he was an old man, and his muscles were scarcely as taut as those of his antagonist. Yet he made a brave fight.

The two men writhed and twisted in the uneven contest. Now the old man was down, then in some unaccountable man-



ner regained his feet. But very soon his strength began to wane.

Leda, frantic with terror and despair, was wringing her hands and praying for the success of her champion. But this could not be.

Benson threw the old man heavily, and then pinned him to the ground.

"Ah!" he gritted fiendishly. "This is my victory. Now, old fool, prepare to die. You dared me and you shall pay for it."

"I am not afraid to die, Jack Benson," declared Samuel Lee, calmly. "But before I die I want to make a request."

"What is it?"

"You know John Bertrand?"

"Yes."

"Go to him and tell him——"

He did not finish the sentence. Leda, driven to desperation by the defeat of her champion, with more strength than one would have deemed possible, had rushed upon Benson and sought to pull him off from Lee. Of course, her strength was not equal to this, but a strange change came over Benson.

His face had been flushed to an appoplectic red by his exertion, and his eyes were starting from his head like those of a maniac. Something like a shock seemed to cause his frame to vibrate and he relaxed his grip on his victim and arose to his feet staggeringly.

"My God!" he gasped in a terror-stricken voice. "I have been stabbed to the heart. What was was it? Oh, I am dying."

Leda recoiled in amazement while Mr. Lee with difficulty arose to his feet. A terrible scene was enacted before his eyes. An expression of abject terror was upon Benson's face, he gasped and panted in a seeming fit, and then with an awful groan pitched forward full upon his face.

For a full minute Samuel Lee stood gazing at the villain's prostrate form. Then he bent down over him and put an ear to his heart. When he arose he lifted one hand Heavenward, and said:

"It is an act of God. The heart has ceased to beat. Jack Benson, villain, and your worst foe, Leda, is dead."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE RESCUING PARTY.

Harry Wilton was overwhelmed with praise for the daring rescue of his mother from the burning dwelling. But this was a small source of gratification compared with his joy at the saving of his dear mother's life.

The house of a neighbor was opened to them, and Mrs. Bertrand was made comfortable. Harry made sure of this, and then went out into the world once more with a spirit of determination such as he had hitherto never manifested.

This was to bring to justice the villain who had ruined his mother's happiness, and had sought his own life. He was much in earnest when he resolved that John Bertrand should be made to suffer for his misdeeds.

Harry knew his influence in Freeport, and that it would be a small effort to raise the necessary band of men to hunt the villain down.

He went to the engine house one morning, and said to Jim Keene:

"Do you remember, Jim, what you said to me just as the alarm rung the other day?"

"I do," replied the fireman readily. "I told you that I knew where that old house was, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I do know where it is."

"Then I want you to go with me to find it. Will you do this?"

"Of course I will."

"I will call for you in an hour."

"Where are you going?"

"To the public square."

"What for?"

"I am going to raise a gang of men. I want fifty trusty fellows to hunt down John Bertrand and his gang."

"Bravo! You'll get them!"

"I feel sure of it."

"But before you go wait till I can get my coat. I am going with you."

Jim threw on his heavy coat, and down into the street he went with Harry Wilton. The boy fireman had a trumpet in his hand and blew on it as he went along.

The effect was electrical. In almost no time the street was thronged. Straight to the square Harry went and mounted a large box.

The people crowded about in an excited state, and all eyes were upon the boy hero, the most popular person in Freeport at that moment. Harry waited until a large crowd had collected, then he made his speech.

"No doubt you can all guess why I have called you together here," began Harry, in his trumpet-like voice. "I need not remind you of the fact that Freeport has of late been cursed with a gang of incendiaries and bank robbers. I think I know well who they are and where to look for them. Of course, it is quite necessary to have a good fire department in Freeport, but it is equally as necessary to guard against incendiary fires. The fire boys cannot always be infallible, and some time Freeport may be destroyed if this gang is not rooted out."

"Now, we want fifty men who are willing to risk life and limb in the pursuit of the villains. Jim Keene and I will lead you. I hope it will not be necessary for me to say more. Let all who will volunteer to go come forward and form a line."

Wild cheers greeted this speech. In a few moments more than five times the number of men had volunteered.

Harry picked out half a hundred good men, and ordered them to report within an hour, fully armed, at the engine house of No. 2.

Then he returned thither with Jim Keene. Preparations were made for the trip over the Black Ridge, and substitutes were found to take Jim and Harry's place at the engine house.

Every man furnished his own horse, and all equipped, the little cavalcade of vigilants rode out of Freeport. Not a man in the fifty but was resolute in the determination to ferret out the incendiaries.

Leaving the town behind them they galloped toward Black Ridge.

Jim Keene led the way, but just before they reached the thick woods he called a halt.

"Now, boys," he said, "I think we had better change our tactics. Suppose we separate and then all come together at the Three Forks, five miles over the ridge? Spread out in a half circle and don't let any corner go unexplored."

It was Jim's fancy that the villains might have another hiding place in the woods, and this was his purpose in spreading the line of advance.

Signals were agreed upon, which all were to answer, and then the division was made.

Harry and Jim kept straight ahead and followed substantially the same path that the boy fireman had followed a few days before.

The summit of the ridge was reached and crossed. Then



eventually they came to the open field and the road just as Harry had done.

But Keene did not follow this road. He crossed another field, when to Harry's surprise they came to a second road, and into this they turned.

"You see," declared Keene, "Parke, the hunter, neglected to tell you to cross the first road. That was why you got mixed up."

"And the deserted house is on this road?" asked Harry eagerly.

"It is. But be prepared for disappointment, for it may not be the right house, you know."

"I feel sure that it will," declared the young fireman confidently. "At least we will keep on."

Keene paused a moment in deliberation. Then urging his horse on, he said:

"The Five Forks, where all of our boys are to meet, are very near here. However, we will ride on a ways further and reconnoiter the house."

So intensely excited that he could hardly speak, Harry galloped on by the veteran fireman's side.

Suddenly Jim pulled up his horse rather abruptly.

"Listen!" he said. "What is that?"

The regular beat of horses' hoofs could be plainly heard upon the road in the rear. They exchanged glances.

"Who can it be?" asked Harry.

"It may be one of our men," said Keene. "But I doubt it. Let us get in here out of sight and see."

Both rode into a thick copse by the roadside. Nearer every moment came the hoofbeats, and then the rider and horse swung into view.

Not until he was quite near did Harry or Jim recognize him. Then the boy fireman gasped and exclaimed:

"Heavens! It is John Bertrand."

An expression of intense satisfaction overspread Jim Keene's features.

"It is our man, sure enough," he said.

"You ride out and we will stop him," suggested Harry. "I will cut him off to the southward."

"No," replied Jim quickly. "That won't do. Let him go right along."

"Why not stop him?"

"For a purpose. Wait and see."

Harry, somewhat against his will, remained inactive and allowed Bertrand to gallop by. There was no mistaking the fact that it was him, his cruel-cut face being contorted in an evil smile.

He galloped on and soon went out of sight beyond a bend in the road. Then Keene rode out of the copse.

He went on in pursuit cautiously, and finally drew rein again in a little bend of the road.

Just ahead could be seen the old house which had been the scene of Leda's captivity.

"There is the place," said Jim. "See, as I live, he will stop there."

"The wolves are tracked to their lair."

Harry was for pushing ahead at once, but Keene retained him.

"That would not do," he declared. "They would escape us. We must first call all the boys together and surround the place. We will then be sure of the game."

"You are right," cried Harry. "Let us lose no time."

The signals agreed upon called most of the parties to the spot, and Keene set about deploying lines to the right and left so as to surround the house.

This all accomplished, he said to Harry:

"Come! Now we will go in and interview Mr. Bertrand."

## CHAPTER XXII.

"THIS TIME I WILL KILL YOU!"

It was an impressive moment when Samuel Lee announced that Jack Benson was dead.

There was no doubting the fact, and it certainly seemed an act of Divine vengeance, for the stroke was so sudden and sure.

Jack Benson would nevermore dog the footsteps and persecute the life of the young girl whom he had dared to love in his brutal fashion.

"Dead!" she gasped, a queer faintness coming over her. "Oh, father!"

She fell into Mr. Lee's arms. The old man lifted her light figure in his arms and bore it into the house.

There he in time pacified her mind, and she gradually recovered. But Benson's body yet lay stiffening outside the door. Mr. Lee could not bear to go near it.

An hour passed thus, and then Leda, lifting her face with a sudden radiant smile, cried:

"Oh, father, you have regained your memory. You know all the past?"

"Yes, my dear child. Heaven be praised," said Mr. Lee, devoutly. "God has kindly brought me back to myself."

"And you will be well and happy once more, and will find your friends, so long lost?"

"I hope so, my darling child," said Mr. Lee, in tones shaking with emotion. "Oh, but there is one reckoning yet which I would forego, and that is with the man who so foully wronged me years ago."

Leda looked up in surprise.

"Why, you never told me of that," she said.

"Ah, that was also buried in the vacancy of my aberrated mind. But it is nothing to you, child, and cannot interest you."

Leda twined her arms about his neck.

"Anything interests me," she declared, "that concerns you, dear father. Have not our interests long been in common? Have we not roamed this country over together, and for years have you not been my father?"

"That is true, my dear child."

"Then why need you fear to confide in Leda?"

"It is a matter which will scarcely interest you, I fear."

"Oh, yes, it will. Tell me who is the man who wronged you?"

Samuel Lee hesitated a moment, then with an impulse he said:

"I do not know why I should hesitate to tell you. His name is John Bertrand!"

"John Bertrand!"

With a hushed cry of amazement Leda sprang to her feet. At the same moment she chanced to gaze out of the window and saw a horseman at the door.

An excited cry escaped her lips.

"Why, father, may Heaven help us! Here is John Bertrand, now."

Samuel Lee started up with a smothered cry.

"John Bertrand," he said, in a strange metallic voice. "Ah, well, the reckoning may as well come now as later."

Bertrand, for he it was, had ridden up to the house and was dismounting from his horse, when he chanced to catch sight of Jack Benson's body.

He recoiled in horror.

"What is all this?" he cried. "What has been going on? What has happened?"

He went forward and turned the corpse over. One glance told him the truth.



"Whew!" he ejaculated, "a broken bloodvessel. That's the end of Jack. But it was something a little out of ordinary which caused that, I know."

He turned to the house and sprang up the steps. Pushing open the door he entered to come face to face with Samuel Lee.

But it was no longer the bent, decrepit, imbecile old man.

There was the fire and light of reason and restored mental energy in the old man's eyes, the white beard had been shaved since Bernard had last seen him, and he now confronted the villain with an attitude which held him spellbound.

It was not the villain's surprise at finding Samuel Lee there; it was no shock of ordinary sort which caused a mighty tremor to convulse John Bertrand's frame, and every vestige of color to leave his face.

"Heaven above!" he gasped in a husky voice. "You here, alive on earth! I thought you dead."

"Oh, you need not fear, John Bertrand," said Mr. Lee in steel-like tones. "I am not an intangible ghost, but a flesh-and-blood reality back from the grave literally, for all these long years I have been buried in the mazes of a beclouded reason."

"You—you did not die?" repeated the shaking villain, in a daze. "Why, I saw you die."

"No doubt you imagined that," said Mr. Lee, with a cold smile. "No doubt you intended to leave me for dead. But it was not to be. Retribution is the sure outcome of such crimes as yours."

"You—where have you been all these years?"

"Under a cloud. Shall I recapitulate the circumstances of that terrible night when, in our little mining camp of the Sierras, you turned upon me and struck me a blow on the head which you fancied killed me? Oh, you intended to murder me, John Bertrand."

Reaction had set in, and a strange change had come over Bertrand. He laughed in a snarling kind of way.

"Oh, that was it, eh? I did not make it sure. I ought to have brought you out of it? Another blow, eh? I can see it all; but you are yet a fool."

A murderous gleam emanated from the villain's eyes. He instinctively began to foresee that this was the beginning of the end. His star was no longer in the ascendant, and ruin hung over him.

That his old-time foe, whom he had once left for dead in the Sierras, should after these years turn up alive, was to him a precursor of disaster, and the plain warning that the hand of God was against him.

A strange hunted light, a desperate maddened glare was in his eyes. Murder was in his heart.

But Samuel Lee stood over him like a Nemesis, and his calm quiet manner had vanished. There was force and pathos and deep wrath blended in his words, as he said:

"Yes, your fate is at hand, John Bertrand. You have wronged me most foully. You, the false friend, the selfish schemer. Not content with leaving me for dead in that Sierra camp, you came home, a wolf in sheep's clothing, and won the confidence of my wife. Yes, played the villain's part to her—scoundrel, monster! There is no law in this land so severe that you shall not feel it. She does not yet know that I am alive. What will her emotions be when we meet, and she knows that you were falsely, unlawfully married to her? Oh, John Bertrand, there is a terrible reckoning between you and I."

Bertrand cowered in abject terror before this man whom he had so terribly wronged. The reader, no doubt, has already guessed that Samuel Lee, the wandering imbecile restored to reason, was in reality James Wilton, home from California, back literally from the dead.

The towering resentment and wrath of the wronged man

was fearful to witness. But only for a time was John Bertrand so deeply abashed.

Thus made suddenly aware of the fact that the man he had wronged was not dead after all, but come back to visit vengeance upon him, he had been overcome with terror, but this gave way presently to cunning and hatred.

"I thought you dead," he muttered.

"I could pardon your murderous attack upon me," continued Mr. Wilton, as we will now know him. "But why did you destroy the happiness of my wife?"

"You know full well," snarled the villain. "I loved her before you married her. She rejected me for you. I swore to win her, and I did. It took years and foul play to do it, but when I start out to gain an end I never fail. I have not failed yet. Once more you have come across my path in life. But you are as big a fool now as you were then. You do not realize that you have run your head into a trap. Your life is as much a stumbling block to me now as ever it was, and, resurrected from the dead though you seem to be, you shall die, and this time I will see that you do not come back to life again. Curse you!"

With a frightful imprecation and a keen knife uplifted in his hand, Bertrand rushed upon his intended victim.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE END.

It would not have seemed that anything could withstand the ferocity of that attack which John Bertrand made upon his lifelong enemy.

Years before he had wronged him, playing the treacherous part of a false friend, and had left him for dead in the mining camp.

The story was just as High Ladder Harry had heard it from his own mother's lips, save that the attempt at murder was not revealed.

As Samuel Lee, the imbecile, Mr. Wilton, Harry's own father, might have went on until death with his identity unrevealed had it not been for the accident which had restored to him his reason.

Recollecting the past the wronged man had become almost heartbroken upon learning of the perfidious treatment of his beloved wife by the villain Bertrand. At first he had not clearly understood why she should have married the villain, but the explanation drawn from Harry while riding over Black Ridge a few days previous had satisfied him that it was not for love that she had married a second time.

This had entirely changed the aspect of things to Mr. Wilton, and though he longed to take Harry in his arms and call him son he had forbore for certain politic reasons.

His first desire was to rescue Leda Lee. It was more than likely that had Bertrand been living happily with his wife he would never have revealed his identity to him. But after learning of his perfidy he was determined to come out before the world and visit vengeance most dire upon his enemy's head.

Bertrand's attack was a terrific one, and that moment might have been Mr. Wilton's last, but for Leda Lee, who sprang forward with a wild scream and clutched the hand which held the knife.

It was just sufficient to prevent the deadly weapon from putting an end to the old man's career. Leda clung to the villain's wrist with the determination of despair.

A savage cry escaped Bertrand's lips as he in vain tried to shake her off. He exerted all his strength, but Leda clung to him.



"Let go!" he snarled madly. "Let go, I say, or I will kill you!"

Still Leda clung to the knife-handle, though every moment she felt her strength growing weaker, and a deadly faintness was coming over her. She felt that she could not hold out much longer.

But at the last moment, when the struggle was at its height, the sound of voices was heard outside, the door was burst open, and two men sprang into the room.

It did not require High Ladder Harry, who was in the lead, a moment to comprehend the situation. With a quick leap forward he hurled Bertrand aside, and Leda, half-fainting, fell into his arms.

"Oh, Harry, Heaven be praised we are saved!"

With flashing eyes Harry Wilton faced the wretch who had attempted the ruin of his life and happiness. Bertrand recoiled desperate and baffled to the other end of the room. Mr. Wilton regained his feet. The end had come. Escape was impossible, for big Jim Keene stood in the doorway. Baffled, driven to the wall, John Bertrand recoiled, and crouching in the corner of the room, held a revolver in his hand.

"John Bertrand, this is the end," cried the young fireman, ominously. "You are tracked down. I call upon you to give yourself up peaceably."

A strange emotion seemed to have seized Bertrand.

"No, I will never give myself up."

"It will be better for you. Fifty armed men surround this house."

Bertrand laughed in a mocking way.

"What care I for that?"

"The law will deal with you summarily."

"Let it deal with me. No, it never will, for I can cheat the law."

The villain took a step forward, and his manner impressed his hearers as he went on in a strange, bitter voice:

"Harry Wilton, I have played a dangerous game, and fortune has failed me. I can see that I am defeated. I am satisfied. I break my sword but never surrender. My life is nothing to me now. I have failed in the greatest game of my life. You are the winner, and I mean to pay you your dues."

"No—do not come near me; it will not be well for you. Let me speak on. I have been a bad man in my life, but before I die I will do one good deed. There is no doubt that they will lynch me?"

"I think they will," declared Harry.

"Have you any hard feelings against me?"

"I cannot help but have hard feelings against the man who has so basely plotted to ruin me."

"You are right," said the villain in a bitter voice, and he was silent for a moment. Then lifting his gaze in an odd way, he asked abruptly:

"If I should humbly ask pardon of you, Harry Wilton, would you forgive me?"

The young fireman was amazed.

"Why, I cannot understand you, John Bertrand," he said.

"Wait, I will say more. Should I tell you that your father is alive and to be restored to you, would you forgive me now?"

A strange, sharp cry escaped Harry's lips.

"You do not mean it?" he cried eagerly. "You trifle with me."

Bertrand's face was marble white. Mr. Wilton had stepped forward and seemed about to speak, but Bertrand, with a wave of his hand, restrained him.

"Give me a chance," he said; then to Harry again. "What have you to say?"

"Are you jesting, John Bertrand?"

"I am deadly in earnest."

"Then I would freely forgive you."

A swift tremor passed over Bertrand's frame. With one hand pointed to Mr. Wilton, he cried:

"There is your father!"

Harry, with a cry, had partly wheeled to gaze at Mr. Wilton, when a sharp report rang out, and a smoking revolver dropped from John Bertrand's hands. He fell like a log.

Horried and forgetful for the moment of all else, Harry sprang forward and bent down over him, crying:

"Oh, God! how awful!"

But he as quickly arose with pallid face and trembling frame.

"He is dead—dead by his own hand."

Overwhelmed with the horror of the thing, the little party stood over the dead body of the suicide for some moments in silence.

Then slowly Harry turned and faced the man whom he had always known as Samuel Lee. A quick, searching glance, and a sharp gasp, and they embraced.

"Is it true?" exclaimed the young fireman, in an ecstatic voice. "Were his dying words those of truth?"

"My own boy—my own Harry," cried Mr. Wilton, with streaming eyes. "Restored to me at last! Oh, now death may come, the end of all, for I have had my surfeit of joy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Justice had been cheated of its own by the suicide of John Bertrand, yet nobody felt sorry that his life had terminated in such a manner.

When the party of vigilants once more rode into the streets of Freeport the full particulars of the affair spread like wild-fire. The little town was convulsed with excitement.

There were a few old acquaintances of James Wilton yet living, and these came forward to joyfully clasp his hand. Others pressed forward to make his acquaintance.

The effect of so joyful a reunion upon Mrs. Bertrand, or, as we will now be pleased to call her, Mrs. Wilton, the pen cannot adequately depict. She was intensely happy in the kind turn that fate had rendered her, and relegated to the banishment of a forgotten past as far as possible that unhappy page in her life, which, after all, so few escape.

But what of High Ladder Harry? Well, he yet lives in Freeport, but he no longer "runs with the machine," though he is an honorary member of No. 2. Big Jim Keene is the foreman, and Harry spends many pleasant hours in the company of his good friends.

Leda was placed in college and emerged a full-fledged young lady of culture. The sparks of that fire kindled so long before did not die out in her heart and Harry's, and they are soon to be happily married.

Bella Benson died in prison.

Such exciting times have never since been known in Freeport, yet the traditions of the town still hold dear the name of their young hero, High Ladder Harry, the boy fireman of Freeport.

THE END.

Read "100 CHESTS OF GOLD; OR, THE AZTEC'S BURIED SECRET," by Richard R. Montgomery, which will be the next number, (280) of "Pluck and Luck."

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